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ABSTRACT

This book explores the intersections of creative writing, composition, feminism, and critical theory in ways that speak powerfully to each discipline. It offers provocative considerations of writing and teaching, side by side with practical features including sample assignments and ready to use classroom strategies, as well as a glossary of terms adapted from theory. The book conceives a writing education where the first task is to create a context in which all students feel privileged to claim their own voices, and it formulates a series of suggestions toward a new model of writing education. (Contains 74 references.) (EF)

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Katharine Haake

What Our Speech Disrupts

Feminism and Creative Writing Studies

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What Our Speech Disrupts

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What Our Speech Disrupts

Feminism and Creative Writing Studies

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Women are, in fact, caught in a very real contradiction. Throughout the course of history, they have been mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write as men *do, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt.*

Xavière Gauthier, in *New French Feminisms*

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I'm writing that, I'm thinking that, but I'm regretting having ever started such a list, for how is it possible not to leave out many more who also should have been included, written down. All those voices opening up. I am so grateful to them. Before them, I thought teaching was supposed to be about what I knew.

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Nancy Krusoe's short story "Landscape and Dream," included here in Chapter 9, "Map 2," is reprinted by permission of the author.

I Geographies

1 Red Shoes: An Introduction

A Beginning

I want to tell you a little bit about this book, which I began some years ago because it seemed to me that we had reached a state of crisis in our profession.

I wrote that.

Then I thought: How long is it even that we've thought of it as a profession—that is, as creative writing, and as an academic discipline? It seemed clear to me at the time that, as writers teaching writing in academic settings, we constituted a profession long overdue for looking very closely at its history and its praxis, especially in relation to the larger context in which it found itself—mostly, departments of English in colleges and universities of various sizes and settings throughout the United States, and still proliferating.

But a crisis? I don't know. Maybe just a split between those of us who see ourselves first as writer-artists—with teaching as a secondary role, the best-paying job we might get that will support our "real" work—and the rest of us, who see ourselves instead as writer-teachers, believing that the two activities are complementary and mutually enriching.

Of course, that isn't fair. There are plenty of writers-cum-artists who are responsible and dedicated teachers, and plenty of committed writer-teachers who are steadfastly serious-minded about their art. So we are not without our rifts, but our rifts are equivocal and characterized more by shared concerns than by irrevocable splits.

Maybe not a crisis, then, but rather an evolving sense of who we are as writers and teachers in a world that has profoundly changed since we first came into it eager to write stories and poems.

But though I conceived of this book as addressing the disparate schisms that separate us, especially as they are expressed in pedagogical practices that reflect ideological difference, I wrote it for our students, who remain both subject to and largely oblivious of the forces that determine their experience of learning writing. And as always, through writing, things changed—what I knew and thought, and my belief in the solutions—for I began convinced that the schisms were absolute and unresolvable, and ended by perceiving them as potential sites of healing.

A Schism

A gentleman in an unemployment line once tried to help me out by directing me to "T" for Technical Writers. I said, not that kind of writer. He looked confused, then concerned. Then he slapped his forehead.

"Oh, I get it," he said, "You're a Shakespeare."

In the beginning, I did locate one fundamental schism between writer-artists and writer-(artist)-teachers. I thought of the former sometimes as mini-Shakespeares, and of the latter as dedicated worker-bee types. I conceived of this division as an ethical dilemma, and worried about how it might affect students.

This is how it looked to me in those days:

As mini-Shakespeares we are master writers, romantic artists prone to inspiration, remote and inaccessible except to others like ourselves, the best among our students, whom we aim to discover and nurture. We are easy with the grading system and its evaluative distinctions between what is "good" and what is not. We are friendly with students whose writing interests us and shows promise. Maybe we are worried that others are beginning to critique the way we do things, but this, we know, is mostly sour grapes. Maybe we're defensive with our department theorists, who treat us as anachronistic curiosities, but what can they possibly know about real writing? And anyway, we just want to do our own work, in the quiet of our homes, undisturbed and recognized almost exclusively for the value of our written words. What any real writer needs is time, and time is what we buy with our teaching.

As worker-(teacher/writer)-bee types, our affiliations lie more with proletarian aesthetics, and we are glad to roll our sleeves up, get down and dirty with our students, and work the language all together so as not to privilege any one writing over any other. If it were up to us, creative writing classes would all be pass or fail. We value the work of every student equally, and if the "better" writers seem wounded by what they take as our indifference, it is because they fail to appreciate the extent to which writing is writing, academic discourse different only in kind from what we do, or even journal writing, or letters. We want desperately to make friends with the theorists among us, but they can't seem to shake their view of us as anachronistic curiosities. And anyway, we've got our work cut out for us, forging liaisons with our overworked and underappreciated composition colleagues, the real writing experts, to whom we would defer. If we don't ever seem to have enough time for our writing anymore, we'll do writing with our students and share it among ourselves, all of us together, writing writers.

Though I always knew that between these two extremes we come in many varied forms—earnest and good people, and good at what we do—it also always used to be easy for me to side with the worker-bee types, disclaim any special status for myself or what I did, and put my faith in theory, which shed a different light on everything we did. Then we hired a theoretically sophisticated lesbian writer at my school, who seemed to flip things in her classroom by holding up radical texts as the ideal, just another substitution for the well-crafted M.F.A. literary story we had come to critique. And I don't know. I suspect I was jealous. I was jealous of her unambivalence, the ease of her as authority. I was jealous that she could tell her students exactly what to do and how to write.

A man I knew once confessed his love for a woman not his wife. I was newly in love then myself and though profoundly committed (as he knew me to be) to monogamy, my emotions clouded my logic and I found myself unable to advise him to stick with his wife. The man was enraged.

"I came to you," he said, "because I trusted you to tell me to do the right thing. It's the wrong time to go starry-eyed with love."

"I can only get excited by what I like," she explained.

What she liked was what she liked to write.

And though the hierarchical organization of her classroom did not seem that different from the traditional creative writing workshop (in it, there were the "good" and "bad" writers, and also the "best"), I was also jealous of the attention and affection of her students.

Nothing seemed easy anymore, and everything seemed vexed.

What I think I mean is, I've been at this long enough to have seen wonderful teaching occur in the most "traditional" classrooms, and to have seen prescriptive aesthetics emerge from the most "radical" sites. And I've made enough mistakes in my own pedagogical "experiments" to feel both humbled and inept. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that there is no longer any one way in creative writing teaching, and to begin to ask what are the many ways there are?

This book is a bit about that.

The Fishbowl

In my house, at present, we have two fishbowls: a cheap, county-fair-style bubble, where we keep the goldfish my younger son feeds to the snake he received for his eighth birthday, and an extravagant tropical fish aquarium my older son received for his eleventh birthday. Sometimes the feeder fish survive the long week between feedings; more often, we find them belly-up in slimy water, white eyes bulging. Either way, their days are numbered. The tropical fish, on the other hand, are carefully attended, their whole environment lavishly maintained and their behavior observed closely for any signs of illness, or, more recently, of procreation.

The fish are all lovely in their water, looping round and back and forth, but the bowls that contain them tell us how to read their beauty.

A creative writing practice that constructs itself in multiple, contradictory, and complementary ways that coexist with grace and equanimity must begin by examining the systems by which it is contained.

A Horrid Little Story

Here's a horrid little story my graduate adviser, old friend, and champion, François Camoin, prefers that I not tell: a long time ago, when I arrived as an anxious Ph.D. student at the University of Utah, he received me as a not-very-good writer. I'd had some experience with this from my early days at Stanford, and there was no mistaking it the night we met at an off-campus writing group some weeks before school would be starting. François is such a nice man, and such an earnest teacher, he never could have intended for his eyes to go murky when we were introduced. Nor could he have meant to respond with such vague inattention, to glance around, as he did, for someone more promising to talk to, to ditch me at the soonest opportunity.

I felt bad and thought maybe I should have gone to Iowa, but there was nothing to be done about it now. And anyway, I was used to it, and fairly philosophical as I found myself resolving, once again, to prove a male teacher wrong about me.

Maybe it isn't nice to tell this story yet again. Maybe, like he says, it didn't really happen. Even so, I do not tell it to point retrospective fingers, but rather to suggest that the way we mark our students is in some respects indelible and that not all of them will have my stubborn streak.

My younger son, Joey, who loves amusement park thrill rides, is nonetheless inclined toward those with the greatest "protection," and will almost always choose padded full chest harnesses over the simple lap guards on old-fashioned wood-scaffolded roller coasters. Joey doesn't mind going upside down and loopy as long as the thrill is benign. Think of pedagogy as protection for our students, for they are on their own roller coasters, and we will always err, and they will need to make their own determinations about who they are as writers, and how they would proceed and where they want to go. Our teaching can help them do that.

For in fact, François was right. If there was ever any proof we can teach creative writing, I am it. When I met him I was a step away from folding into silence out of failure and exhaustion, and what stopped me was largely what he taught me. What he taught me in the next years was his own weird blend of theory and writing and praxis, and what it gave me was the language and perspective to construct my own other weird blend of understanding of what I do, and thus to persist in my writing. This did not happen overnight, was in fact many years in sorting out, but it is also what this book is about.

Another Story

When I was a student in the 1970s and 1980s, we didn't have to worry about any of these things. We had our ups and downs, our frantic, tear-stained moments. But we knew what to do and we did it.

Time passed.

Now we were teachers, and in our classrooms we remembered our own early workshops where we ourselves were molded by crucible-theory pedagogies. We thought about that pain, but we also thought about how we persisted nonetheless because, in the first place, we "had to," and, in the second, we'd once heard Theodore Solataroff say that the writers who "made it" were not the most talented, not even those who worked the hardest, but those who best tolerated rejection.

To which Richard Hugo added, "Who turn it into challenge, and then triumph."

We were, of course, among those who "made it" (we had our teaching jobs to prove it), so we girded ourselves to train our students first in rejection. We told them about Solataroff and Hugo because we believed this would assuage their wounded egos and also because we wanted to prepare them for the harsh realities of the writing life. This was our duty, and we were relentless. We lectured about slush piles. We threw out daunting numbers, culled from the *New Yorker* and the Writer's Guild. We stressed the high level of competition in countless M.F.A. programs all over the country, times the number of students graduated each year, divided into the tiny handful of available creative writing teaching jobs. We instructed them to contemplate the remainder, what's left over, what doesn't go in. We told them that the average starting age of tenure-track assistant professors in creative writing is something like thirty-seven. Though we acknowledged the occasional six-figure advance for first-time genre novels, we also counted friends with multiple published novels who eventually ran out of luck, or who continued to receive five thousand dollars for books that took many years to write. Then we told them what we made publishing with literary presses, went home, had a drink, and reviewed the stellar virtues of tough love. In the beneficent glow of such love, we were confident the real writers would survive it.

More time passed.

What we did not think about, not because we had forgotten but because we did not like to, were the people we knew in graduate school who, one by one, stopped writing, disappeared. A few of them were a little crazy and they weren't even among the best writers in the class. But maybe they had some talent. Wasn't there one who was really pretty good?

We thought about the one that was pretty good. We thought about the others. We started questioning the virtues of tough love and a pedagogy based on principles that relentlessly reduce writing and who gets to do it.

At first we stopped making predictions about what we might expect from our students. We learned to accept that the "best" work often comes from the most unlikely sources—the sixty-something returning housewife in designer jeans, the recently deaf young black woman who neither signs nor reads lips but for whom the memory of language is both urgent and loud, the conventionally well groomed young white man with the clipped hair and displaced Minnesota smile, the Latina in satin hot pants (this is L.A.), the pasty-faced overweight girl whose long sleeves, even in the hottest Santa Anas, cover acute psoriasis. We held back on our practice of tough love.

At home, we had another drink and turned our hands up on our laps, like a woman awaiting a transfusion.

Nor were our departments any help. Our literature colleagues didn't really think we'd pass the test of time. The theorists, if they noticed us at all, found us quaint or amusing. And our composition colleagues, whose business also was writing, were often suspicious or resentful, for we had lighter teaching loads, and when had we ever been any help to them? No one really thought we could teach what we taught, and it looked like an easy ride to them.

By now we were really confused. And we were not alone as we struggled to make sense of a profession that was only just beginning to know itself in a new way, opening up.

This book is about what happens in the absence of an ethics of tough love as a whole profession opens up. And it is about not being alone anymore.

The Conversation

It was not knowing quite how to proceed that was most difficult. I knew from reading books about writing that one ought to proceed with an air of authority, but every time I started it seemed as if the best I could come up with was not just questions, but questions that questioned even themselves, even the very problem of knowing—what we think we know, how we know it, why. The great debate was on: was theory good or bad for writers? And, frankly, most writers retrenched, both afraid of the unknown and protective of how things had "always been." My own approach, however clumsy, was to plow forward to see if I could make some sense, through theory, of my writing and my teaching. Then one day my students started chanting, "No more silence!" I knew we had got there through theory, but I could not yet say how.

A graduate student once told me that the first time he heard my standard disclaimer that it wasn't "as if I understood any of this theory stuff either," *that* was the first time he'd felt included in the conversation.

I claim that this book is about integrating several strands of English studies, especially critical theory and composition studies, with creative writing, which for too long has been aligned exclusively with literature and art. And it is. But this book is also about making the conversation more inclusive, for it is within such broadened discourse parameters that writing will ultimately thrive.

This book is about letting writing thrive in the context of a more inclusive conversation.

What This Book Is Not

It is not a seamless argument.
It does not speak in a single voice.
Its separate parts, together, are not graceful.
It is not a set of answers.
It is not definitive.

Why This Book and Not Another Book?

The single seamless argument and definitive set of answers we all of us desire belies our heterogeneity and assumes that in front of our classrooms we share a single mission. My mission is not your mission. My student A is not your student A.

Some days I wish I would demur more.

Others, I think: if it has taken me almost half a century to speak my mind as I would speak it and not as I believed it was supposed to be spoken, then this—the nearly half a century—is an important lesson for all students. Voice, in this sense, is never easy.

Some days I think I should cut more.

Others, I want to leave everything in.

As a girl, when I learned how to sew, I became intensely interested in seams, in hems, in bindings, a whole new elegant language of how fabric holds together. So, too, in writing, and I am frequently suspicious and disheartened by what looks like seamlessness, everything interesting smoothed out and over.

Frankly, this is not a neat and tidy book, and this is just something I live with. For if what follows is fraught with splittings off and contradictions, if in the middle of a sentence I break off and go on about my sons as if you should be interested (are you interested?) in my sons, it is because this book adopts a practice of interconnectivity, as concerned with the synapses between and among things as it may be in the things themselves, concerned too with the continua along which they may be found, and the variety of discourses by which they may be expressed. Some of these will naturally collide, and others will more gracefully coexist. Because I view them all as different strands of the same thing, I believe that to choose among them reduces the aggregate, makes it less rich, less complex, less real.

"We are earth," a woman poet recently remarked to me. She was pointing to her own hand, the cells of which, she said, vibrated at exactly the same pitch as those of rock and soil. "We are that which we are busy destroying."

Some Questions of Difference

Let's just say that though I am a woman, and though much of what I've learned that I will say here I learned as a consequence of being a woman in my body and in this culture, nevertheless, I still use the concept of gender as an organizing principle and metaphor for other kinds of marginalization, which I further define not as absolutes but rather as positions along never-fixed continua, stretching not two but many ways from an imaginary center we recognize largely by instinct. Principle, metaphor, position: Gender as a function, which can become inclusive if we are not stingy with our experiences and meanings. Not to conflate the wide spectrum of difference, just that I can speak with some authority about women, more than about race, or class, or same-sex sexual orientation, or even masculinity, though my children are both boys, and I am learning. This is not a hierarchy, but a matrix, where difference is itself a value, something we can look at and be curious about, take pleasure in, exalt.

But can we know it? Can we ever really know it?

Speaking as a woman, what I would say is that it is never enough to know what we know; we also need always to know how we know it, and, most especially, to know what we don't know. To know the knowing, as well as the not.

The monumentality of difference, which permeates the classroom, is the difficulty of knowing how to look at what we are looking at, of taking it up without taking it over. For if to know what we can't know—the monumentality of difference, for example—the only way we can—through the conventions and structures of the already-known—will distort, or reduce, or erase the complexity and nuance of the difference itself, are we just stuck in our own little fishbowls?

Do we say: *I cannot know your experience. You are Black, you are White, you are Latino, you are Nisei.*

Do we say, if we are women: *Oh I understand all about that. That's just like me, I . . .*

And if we're not, do we somehow eclipse the difference in other, more oblique ways?

If you are a woman and if your boyfriend ever said to you, "I know you better than you know yourself," or if your husband ever said, "This is what all women want," then you will know what I mean. And surely, it is not as if we do not love our boyfriends, our husbands, the authors and other men who turn their gaze on us and see what they will us to be instead of who we are. No, all we really want is what everyone must want, a space to be and speak who we are, as we know us, our own selves. If the gaze that constructs us does not know its own self as a gaze, but perpetuates itself as both natural and true, then that small space anyone requires is erased.

Hence, the broad questions of all these "othernesses."

And yet imagination is not entirely benign, for to assume that it can transcend the boundaries between us, whoever we might be, and what we loosely, freely call now the Other, is to align ourselves with the same romantic ideologies by which the "Other" has long been contained. It is a vexing problem. Do we simply assume we cannot know anything beyond our own experience—you in your fishbowl, and me in mine? Certainly not; but neither can we act as if the fishbowls, which are not of our making, do not exist.

Me in mine. You in yours. Is there no common ground for meeting, for knowing and not-knowing?

Perhaps it is enough to turn the fishbowl, instead, into a frame. Perhaps it is enough to acknowledge the frame as a way of knowing and to proceed accordingly, aware of ourselves inside our own frames, all of us together in this precise cultural and historical moment that requires that we begin here.

Hence, again, gender. I can know your experience *(you are poor, you are Sioux, you are blind)* because it shares a little space in common with my own in relation to the whole rest of the culture. But it is also different, and some of this difference I can know and can imagine, and some I can only name, and some I cannot know at all. We are alike, and we are different.

For if we again define gender and other categories that exist at what we once called the margins of the culture as both function and position, it is easy to see where the linkages and splittings occur. And because we are talking about difference as defined along continua it will always, in the end, disappear in its own opposition, but not without a trace, never without a trace. And why would we want to erase it? To acknowledge that the line along which we define who we are in relation to each other is marked by both sameness and difference is to allow for both, while to deny the line itself, to make a claim instead for something like universality, things we all share, is to mark a single point into which everything else disappears as a blur.

Two More Little Stories

One: Let me bring this back to the writing classroom, where everybody knows (does anybody care?) that the written text is separate from the student who writes it. Once a text becomes a text, it becomes autonomous, a structure of words, something to "pick apart" and analyze, something disconnected from whoever might have brought it in. Once it comes before the workshop, we are free to say anything we like. This is nothing personal, it is just (as we all know) "good for writing."

Of course, now that we are teachers, we, or some of us at least, no longer subscribe to the longstanding traditions of our own workshops, up to and including the obligatory period of seclusion and despair that followed any workshop session, during which it was expected we would wail and weep.

Stanford, 1975. The Jones Room damp with girlish tears.

Girlish. What kind of word, even, is that—*girlish?*

If our students weep, we never know it. Well, maybe once or twice, a young woman breaks down. Umm, what are we to do now?

"Don't cry," we murmur. "Don't cry, please don't cry."

Two: I used to be an expert at academic discourse. I could talk a straight line and footnote my endnotes. I had excellent MLA skills.

But if you had asked, I would have had to confess that in order to endure my final academic lecture at Stanford I was forced to inflict minor pain on myself. The man, the professor, was so famous, and he was talking in his lecture hall, with slides, about nature. Who was I, with my paper clip, anyway? This was nature?

Now, more than a quarter century later I confess that what remains of that long afternoon is not the brilliance of the man or his teaching, not even one memory of his nature slides, but just the unending drone of his voice. Yes, and even now, typing that, typing "drone," not once but twice I type instead, "drown." A quarter century later and still I'm drowning.

So, one day instead I let my sentence slide off itself mid-sentence, just to see what would happen, where it would end up. This is not against academic discourse, which has enormous value for our intellectual lives and developments. But it is not the only value, and what I discovered, letting go, in the slippages, was not about everything that goes into academic expression—which is immense and impressive and quite wonderful and necessary—but instead what gets left out.

All the rest of me.

What had not yet been given voice.

Interstices. Connections. Synapses.

What's in This Book, the Different Parts

This introduction, in which I attempt to provide both a formal logic and some suggested strategies for reading.

- Narrative essays (Part I: Geographies).
- Writing about what we do in class: exercises, course design, how we talk to students (Part II: Cartographies).
- Student writing. Throughout.
- Something of a "theory glossary" I wrote (Part III: Legends).
- Little stories everywhere, because that is how I know things: narration as knowledge. I tell stories.

The Introduction

Let's just say I never really wanted to write this book, though I know it is impolite to say so. Like any writer, I was strongly conflicted. People would ask me, wouldn't you rather be doing your *own* work, meaning, I suppose, my fiction. I'd think, this is *my* work. I'd think, well, *writing is writing*. But of course I did have my longing to write something else, and nothing I knew about teaching would remain very stable very long.

Then, periodically, I did want to write this book, because writing generates its own imperative and logic, and also because it helped me think more clearly about teaching and made me more effective in the classroom. Still I struggled with the stance of authority I felt obligated to assume. It did not, in any way, suit me, but it was, I believed, what would be expected.

And have you noticed how much student writing fails because the student feels obliged to disappear? Stripped of any discernible person or voice, such writing feels necessary to the student because of the prevailing belief that voicelessness is the same as objectivity is the same as authority. Intent on sounding the way they think they are supposed to sound, students end up sounding awful. We know how bad this is for writing because we see it all the time, the strangulated voices, the convoluted elevated diction, the flattened illogic of tone. It is easy to see this as a problem, and we go to great lengths to convince students they will be much better writers if they just stop trying to sound the way they think they are supposed to sound and start sounding a little more like themselves. One day I heard myself say this to my students. I thought, well, heck, will you listen to yourself?

In "Toward a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice," Susan Sniader Lanser discusses the problem of authority in narrative texts. She writes:

> In thus linking social identity and narrative form, I am postulating that the authority of a given voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties. Discursive authority—by which I mean here the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice—is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities. In Western literary systems for the past two centuries, however, discursive authority has, with varying degrees of intensity, attached itself most readily to white, educated men of hegemonic ideology. One major constituent of narrative authority, therefore, is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power. At the same time, narrative authority is also constituted through (historically changing) textual strategies that even socially unauthorized writers can appropriate. Since such appropriations may of course backfire, nonhegemonic writers and narrators may need to strike a delicate balance in accommodating and subverting dominant rhetorical practices. (185)

She goes on to acknowledge that while some women writers have questioned not only "those who hold authority and the mechanisms by which they are authorized, but the value of authority as Western cultures have constructed it," the project of "self-authorization . . . is implicit in the very act of authorship." Two of the strategies she examines for doing so are "extrarepresentational functions" (in which the narrator reflects, judges, generalizes about the world, or directly addresses the narratee with comments on the narrative process), and reliance on the personal voice.

In my writing, I attempt to establish a context within which certain manners of speech challenge dominant rhetorical practices, and rely, instead, on different kinds of "authorities"—the personal, the multidiscursive, the extrarepresentational.

In other words, it is its own slippage. This refusal to hold things in their familiar places is itself a way of framing both writing and teaching to open out new possibilities for knowing.

Geographies—The Essays

The essays continue in the same vein. They are braided; they are multidiscursive; they are narrative; they are self-conscious, ironic, oblique. I wrote them at different times and in different contexts, and they circle, in their own ways, both same and different concerns. Looked at one way, they chart the development of my thinking about teaching and writing, which is still—and always—evolving. If I contradict myself, I contradict myself. If I repeat myself, I am only a little bit sorry.

Mostly, these essays are about writing and teaching, but they are also personal, at least in part because I am, by temperament, a storyteller, one who organizes understanding and experience through narrative. *Sit down*, I will say, *let me tell you a story*. If my child is crying, I will tell him a story. If I don't have a story to tell, I will make one up. Wouldn't you?

For if language knows a subject, not a person, then the pronoun I am using is only mine on loan. Because you do not know me I can tell you almost anything, and may, and you will assign it your own truth value and meaning, as will students. In this way, self and story become lessons for writing, as we become our own texts, multilayered and extrarepresentational.

A story—any story—goes out into the world with its own particular attitude. It knows itself a certain way, is preening or unassuming, ambivalent or righteous, self-deprecating or omnipotent, depending. This is a delicate but critical point, so I want to be careful. I'd like to take my storytelling self and look at it with you. I'll wear my brown shoes if you wear the blue.

Years ago (another little story) I was asked at my dissertation defense what feminist writing might look like, and so I talked at some length about polyvocality, uneasiness with mainstream convention, self-reflexivity, gaps, silences, disruptions, blurred boundaries between the personal and public, circuitous textual strategies, cross-genre forms, and so on.

"But what you are describing," one examiner said, "just sounds like avant-garde writing."

I allowed this might be true, but argued that while two texts might look alike—one by a woman and one by a dominant male writer whose work is avant-garde—they will nonetheless have come into being differently. If the male writer, who essentially owns literary history, should discard his heritage as exhausted, it is a gesture fraught with confidence and optimism (if not grandiosity). Whereas a woman writer may never have felt easy in any tradition. Her apparently radical writing comes from the undersides of textuality, from never really feeling, quite, entitled to be writing. So she may be awkward, tentative, probing. Her work does not arise out of a sense of her power, but a sense, instead, of its opposite. It constitutes her struggle and ambivalence.

From the perspective of the female author, whose anxiety is one of authorship (Gilbert and Gubar), any anxiety of influence (Bloom) the male writer suffers may seem highly enviable.

Even if the surface of the texts is identical.

So, too, with how story constructs itself here. I see my continuing reliance on narrative as feminist for many reasons. Among them:

It represents the way in which we ourselves are made of story, and teaches us to know our own selves differently.

It accommodates a logic of porous reciprocity. My story is not just about me, it is about you—about us. A univocal, fixed, conventionally male quest story tells of going out into the world and finding there the single way to be a writer. These are more multiple excursions, little attempts at discovering many ways to write. They are what I know, and so I tell them; but I also tell them because I recognize my own experience in that of students—what it's like to be outside, the always impossible struggle to find a way, any way, to speak. Not so much a model of how they should be like me, but rather of how I am like them.

It allows for the bringing of one's whole self to the classroom, authorizing other ways of knowing.

It fosters paradox and ambiguity, depends on "both/and" visions, insists multiple contradictory tenets may be simultaneously true.

It cannot be predicted.

It circles, is polyvocal, confounds.

It remembers Trinh T. Minh-ha's distinction between "writing *about* [the] self" and "writing the self" (28).

It comes from the undersides of things and opens up.

The essays here are about how things can open up in the context of a porous reciprocity. They are guided by a weird blend of theory, writing, narrative, and praxis, derived from the conviction that: (1) writing should continue in the lives of all our students, and (2) what counts as writing is never fully known or stable. More than anything, these essays are about the struggle into voice every writer faces, and how we as teachers may help guide our students toward theirs. Telling stories—on ourselves, with others, looping over and under, warp and weft—is an ongoing and important part of that guidance.

Cartographies—What We Do in Class

In some ways, the more practical-minded part of the book. Where to go with certain theories, into practice. And how.

I begin with exercises, their logic, why we use them and what we may expect from them, what not. At one time I believed directed writing could cure everything that ailed undergraduate creative writing classes. I conceived of this book as a guide to writing them. I thought this might turn us around.

Now I see this project as involving many stages and directions and components.

So I include, as well, something about redesigning the workshop, and some sample syllabi, which may illustrate another kind of twist. In particular, Creative Writing Studies (a required core course in our graduate program) looks at us looking at ourselves, problematizes who we are and what we do, maps fishbowls. Then three different versions of the same writing course, not so much models as parameters. Every time I teach a course I see new ones. Don't you?

Legends—An Easy-Reference Guide

Much of this book turns to different strands of English studies to suggest new ways to think and also talk about what it is we do when we write: chiefly theory.

For a while, I thought that would be our salvation, but of course there isn't any one solution. Still, theory from a writerly perspective can help us reimagine our practice and experience of writing, as well as the writing we write. And since we can't rely on theorists to provide us this perspective (they're too busy being theorists who believe in what they do), we need to construct it ourselves.

This isn't anything against theorists. It's just that what they do is not the same as what we do. And so I wrote a theory reference guide to reflect back on writing for writers, taking liberties and making full use of invention, play, irony, and imagination. That is, I translated a wonderful language. My translation begins by rejecting certain principles of mastery and ownership and proceeds with free play across boundaries between disciplines.

Don't show it to your department theory heads, who, if they are not nice, may roll their eyes and make you feel as if a writer is a small, low thing. Even if they're nice, they will still roll their eyes.

Share it with your students who, under the influence of this way of thinking and talking, may begin to see their writing unfold in absolute defiance of the blank page.

The Argument

On the whole, this book argues for a shift within the discipline that would respond to student difference and allow for reconceiving creative writing as a practice that may take many forms of value in the lives and educations of our students. It attempts to formulate a radical pedagogy of inclusion that sees the creative writing classroom as an intra- and interdisciplinary site where basic questions of language and discourse can lead to transformed notions of how we know and experience not just our writing, but ourselves. Such a classroom might be conceived of as a site of bricolage, where the teacher-writer, together with her or his student-writers, uses everything at hand not just to make writing happen, but to do so within a critical framework that reveals writing systems and gives students authority over their own work.

My basic assumption remains that the defining struggle for many emerging creative writers, whose experience of life and cultural backgrounds may not reflect those of their teachers or their institutions, is not so much about the production of art as it is about the more primary struggle between speech and silence. Thus, our purpose as creative writing teachers ought to be to construct a nonhierarchical space within which we can expand prior notions of what might count as writing and extend to every student the privilege of his or her own speech. Once writing fully begins, the final goal of any creative writing curriculum ought to be to provide students with the experience, materials, and framework within which they can define the guiding questions that will sustain writing through the rest of their lives.

My basic approach is feminist: an organizing principle, a narrating strategy, a position, a value, a metaphor, desire, a wish.

How Is This Feminist?

A long time ago, when I first started thinking about teaching in a systematic way, I directed a great deal of my critique at the figure of the mentor, and you will hear that here, somewhat later. I believed in those days that if we could simply shift the attention of the classroom to the text and the problem of writing, the problem of the writer would just disappear. No more tear-dampened classrooms, I thought. No more confused and needy students.

Students are almost always needy.

Confusion is often (but not always) good.

Not long ago, a liberal studies student in my women's lit class wrote a final project with such intensity and passion that it took me by surprise and knocked my socks off. Her name was Perla Carbajal; she was a first-generation college student, and here is what she wrote:

> What did I walk in the door with?
> I was definitely struggling to find myself.
> You say "through the Dominant Language". . . to get to the other side.
> Yeah . . . ? OH! Okay, YEAH I do struggle with my silence and my intense desire to speak. The ambivalence. I'm willing to speak, I want to join in the conversation. HEY, that's just like me, I feel the double voicedness. I know what you mean. Your words make me stronger, I want to make it strong too.
> You know all the words, what did that word mean? I'm intimidated.
> Outside this discourse. I try, but it comes out, "How's your teeth? So how was it, the operation? How are those dagburned gums. Does it hurt?" Stupid! Shut up, you trip over your mind even in front of the woman who is here to empower you. God, that is NOT being able to manipulate the conversation. Sorry. K
> But silence is sorrier.

Consider, even just metaphorically speaking, Nancy Chodorow's early formulations in *The Reproduction of Mothering* on the construction of female identity–how the boy child separates early from the primary caretaker, if she is the mom, through a gender identity produced negatively, in opposition to the woman who nurtures him, but how instead, the girl child sees herself as being like this other woman in a positive gender identification that resists separation until the girl child goes out into the world in a sex-devalued role. In a sex-devalued role.

One: Nancy Chodorow argued things would change.

How have things changed? As my sons entered sports-playing ages, I came to know many men deeply involved in their parenting, but not in the pre-schools. Not changing diapers, up at night. Not in that primary way.

How many women do you know who struggle as adults to forge identity—any identity—in opposition to that of their mothers, what so many of their brothers did when they were two? Nancy Chodorow argues that female identity must remain porous and fluid, able to fuse with another as a mother, even as the woman retains her separate sense of self—*both/and*—multiple, shifting. We are known for our ability to do several things at once—fold laundry, talk on the telephone, comfort children, plan our next article or book. Many balls in the air, arcing gracefully above us.

Until, that is, they fall. (Poor, poor woman: whatever made her think to want it all?)

I do not want it all. I want it reconfigured. Not everything at once, just things different.

And then, even just metaphorically speaking: what might our shifting, porous sense of self, our fluidity and multiplicity—what might *that* have to do with how we construct ourselves in language, how we speak?

Shh, I am telling you a story.

Perla wrote:

> The feelings are there, how do I put them together into words? How do I join the conversation??!! How do I talk too? Shhhhhh.
>
> So I concentrate on the enemy. Feed my hate. I hate misogyny. I love men, those Martians. It's not my BooBoo's fault. He's just different. We can't have the same conversation, how could he possibly know what it is to be a woman? (He doesn't need to.)
>
> DAMN RIGHT he's different! He's keeping it that way. You bought into it, don't you see?! Immersed in the Patriarchal Order, it's seeped into, in through, your pores. You're a woman, you know what it's like. You're a woman. Can you define your experience?

YEAH! . . . Uh, . . .
Then what's it like to be a man, do you suppose?

Consider, even just metaphorically, the work of Jacques Lacan on the construction of identity in language, how a person begins as not much more than a fragmented matrix of nerves and impulses, a hand thrust in front of one's face confused with oneself. Ourselves. Then, in the mirror stage, somewhere between six and eighteen months, we see another self—*ourselves*—in the mirror, whole and integrated, a total being. This, we think, triumphantly is us. We feel whole and good and happy and content. But we are still confused, for now we think that everything is us, especially our moms, the women who hold us and nurture us. They too are us. Whole and integrated, co-extensive. We feel good, content, complete. But there is a problem: all this is illusion. We are not our image in the mirror. We are not our moms. And we will not be us, who we really are, until we split off into language, the symbolic order, learn to say "I," learn to say, in effect: "I am he who has lost something. I am lack." Lack. Split off from our mirror image–cum–mom into language, the symbolic order.

Split. Lack.

This, then, is the origin of desire, as for the rest of our lives we attempt to recreate the sense of wholeness and well-being we experienced in the mirror stage—which was, however, illusion. We can't get back to it, because it never existed in the first place. Can't fulfill desire. Can't. Lack.

Woman?

What is woman?

For if *we* are *he* who has lost something, who is *she*? *She* is she who has come into being not just as lack, but as absence, for the order of language is not just symbolic, it is phallocentric, hinged on a structure of dual, hierarchized oppositions in which woman is aligned with dark things underneath.

If this is so, just if it is: what is there before language? Who were we then?

Perla wrote:

> Well, they (men) get to feel good about being bad, I feel bad
> about being bad, sometimes I feel bad about being good. They get
> to get dirty, I don't want him to smell me, perfume, feminine
> deodorant spray, I shaved today   and they get to think
> dirty, For *cultural feminist, the enemy of women is not merely a*

> *social system or economic institution or set of backward beliefs but masculinity itself and in some cases male biology. Cultural feminist poetics revolve around creating and maintaining a healthy environment—free of masculinist values and all their offshoots such as pornography.* SHIT, I like porn. No, that's not it either. They get to sow some oats (I had an oat once or twice). They get to play sports and get pain, What are humans about million years old, It's 1997, did you hear about the WNBA, will they make 60 cents of every man's dollar too? They get to have the right to an education, what was the year the first woman was allowed to attend the American educational institution anyway? They get to make the rules, You haven't the right to do *that* with your womb, we'll make the laws to prove it! Steinam said, If men had wombs, abortion would be sacrament.
>
> Have you asked yourself why you know so much about being a man? I am within the union of the Venn Diagram, the canon, Dominant Discourse. I am a conditioned mute. Acutely aware of the discourse that pulls up a seat to THE conversation. The discourse within which I know myself alienates me. That is why I feel weird, that is why I can't talk. The chair is pulled out from under me. But, then again, have the muted and oppressed always been people with vaginas? Oh.

I went to my Ph.D. program intending to study the work of American women short story writers: Flannery O'Connor, Jane Bowles, Carson McCullers.

"Did you say short women," they said. "We notice that you are yourself short."

They said, "What, no Faulkner, no Hemingway, no Fitzgerald, no way."

They said, "This is not, you know, properly speaking, something we study." What I did, I wept. I cried right in front of the man with the power.

"Virginia Woolf," I said. "She said there *is* such a thing as a female sentence. Why can't I study what my own sentence is? Why?"

He said, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha."

Then I started writing. How could I not?

Perla wrote:

> Do you want all that, all that they get to do or be? Uh, . . . yeah, I do want to move within the functioning world of the male zone. It's where I get reward. It's where I get PAID. It's where I get to talk, I like to talk. But, I want my wild zone too, the woman in me IS part of me I don't want to deny. Cannot deny. I am Wild too. Oh, . . . I want to be Both/And. I can't be anything else. Rachel [Blau

> DuPlessis], sorry I called it schizophrenia, that signifier has a negative connotation.
>
> You must know yourself within the dominant patriarchal order. That dominant, patriarchal order is existent within yourself. We have all been immersed in it.
>
> It's a part of me, it courses through my blood, milk, breasts, clitoris, can I hate a part of me? Get to know it. Over and over and over. Hate alienates. Understand instead.
>
> Yeah, everything I've known, I've known within the construct of the patriarchy. I understand that my understanding has been skewed.

When my sister was in graduate school in clinical psychology, she knew a woman who was doing research on successful women—corporate presidents, surgeons, endowed chairs at prestigious institutions. She interviewed them all, all the successful women, and this is what she found: she found it did not matter how successful they might be, or how enduring their successes, for at each new step, each advancement, each new achievement or responsibility or recognition, 100 percent of the whole—each and every one of these successful women—was haunted by the fear that now, at long last, she'd be discovered as the fraud she believed she really was.

I should use quote marks, I should say "fraud." But I have been there too, and know that in the moment there are no quotation marks. There is only dread and fear and consuming inadequacy.

Perla wrote:

> What about the books [by women, a women's lit class]? They're outside of it.
>
> It's the endings that bother: going crazy, death, trapped, no ending leaving me wanting more, more, frustrated, like premature eja
>
> . . . sorry, but I'm still conditioned to hearing that clean end, I'm still imposing the insertion of the climax in the narrative, followed by the closure. I still yearn for the pleasure, the closing. I used to think it was an American convention. I'm sure it'll take way more than a semester, but I recognize. Yeah, I'm just like them, those writerly authors, You probably hate my jumpings across the synapses.
>
> I love the books, a lot of "that's just like me" too. I hate the books. They weren't ammunition against the patriarchy. But they were, in ignoring it.
>
> —It didn't conform, this. but don't dismiss me.
>
> This *is* for you.

> This is what I'm walking out the door with: I can listen to the voices, through all your gaps, and all of your abrupt silences, through the swirling that your discourse is, ever and ever without end. I once thought your eccentric language was due to your total immersion in the patriarchal discourse. You knew it so well, you didn't have to bother with letting us catch up. No that wasn't it either. This is what I am walking away with, I hear your voices. I read now and hear the voices. The new paradigms softly subvert the dominant. It's so confusing should I kiss you or kick you? I love all your shoes, especially the blue ones.

Perla is Chicana, someone who might not have found her way to college just a single generation, or even a decade, ago. Even now, it's difficult. She struggles with her boyfriend and sometimes with herself, but her mom, she says, has always been her strongest supporter. As a liberal studies major, Perla wants to be an elementary school teacher, not a writer. We should be so lucky that the teachers of our children might be like her, and her writing will enrich the lives of many others.

What is writing for, if not that?

That is also what this book is about, an opening out of spaces within which we—all of us—can find a writing that will enrich our lives and those of others.

Once I was happy myself with the ending: *no more mentors.* It made a certain sense to me. I was comfortable, having removed myself from the equation. It was safer in the shadows, behind theory, not any object of attention. How could I have counted on my shoes?

What Perla wrote came with a sculpture she had built of a woman inside scaffolding, like a suspension bridge. (Was it a bridge? How and where are we suspended, inside what?) When she read her paper to the class, I cried, though I'd thought I was well beyond tears.

I always think that. Then the students remind me, with the full force of their whole lives, that they are really there, not just names on my rosters from whom I can hide behind theory, and it starts all over again. However good, or even necessary, it feels to reject the concept of mentor, it is not finally possible. They will turn us into what we would not be, and why shouldn't they?

Perla's essay convinced me you can't not be a mentor. Everyone walks in the door bringing something with her.

One, we must redefine mentor.

Two, we must proceed with caution, all the way down to our shoes.

I cried because of what Perla brought to her writing and her project, the whole complex matrix of herself, who she was, her emotional as well as her intellectual self, her private as well as her public being. The problem with traditional mentor modeling is that the master writer poses as an authority that the student is supposed to learn to imitate, to *be*. If we can't not mentor (and I think in my own mind the word "mentor" got mixed up with "master" a long time ago), then we have to mentor in a way that problematizes the very process of mentoring. We have to foreground the structures of the classroom in such a way that they are made to be contradictorily coherent—obsolete and inevitable at once.

Is this feminist?
You bet. This is feminist.
What is woman?
Woman: not a gender, but a metaphor, a principle, a position, desire, a wish.

How well I remember that fraud feeling. Crammed awkwardly inside a linear syntax and mode of thinking, I lent myself to that feeling for what seems now like eons, a whole lifetime of inadequacy and shame. The longer I forced myself into this model, the smaller I was inside it, the more choked and fewer my words, the less I felt I had anything to teach. Inside this model, I was perfectly fungible. I could be any other writer-teacher, and in time I would not recognize myself.

Teaching writing is not, as I once thought, defined by our ability to separate the writer from the text, though surely our texts are separate from ourselves, and it is our business to recognize and talk about them that way. But only in part. For they are also us, our texts, who we are and what we put in them, and we can say the same of our students. We must say the same of our students.

I think, for example, about Perla.

That semester did not start off well. I had too many classes (four), too many students (one hundred–plus), and then, quite unexpectedly, surprise wisdom teeth. The first day of classes I discovered that one of them had migrated high into my sinus and lodged itself against my orbital nerve. There were other complications, so when I returned to teaching after surgery, I wanted to pretend it never happened. My face was still swollen and bruised; speech, even opening my mouth, was difficult and painful. I did not want to talk about it at all.

But Perla did. "How did it go?" she wanted to know. "Oh, ow. Does it still hurt a lot?"

Grumpy, uneasy on pain medication, I didn't appreciate her concern, and it wasn't until the end of the semester that I understood she was just trying to find a way, any way, to talk.

Our whole educational system, and creative writing inside it, is set up in such a way that if you don't find the right way to talk, no one will listen. If this book is to be about learning how to listen with a difference (and it is), then it must also speak itself differently. Outside the linear syntax and straight-line logic of thesis and argumentation, anything is possible as we make ourselves present, whole beings and minds.

I should have thanked Perla, who was only being nice, but I was embarrassed to be seen in my body, as opposed to in my story, which I believed I knew and could control. In the future, I will try to know better.

This book is about trying to know better. It is not a straight line to anywhere, but rather an over and under, a warp and weft, that attempts instead to raise such issues for our discipline so as to illuminate the questions that will guide us, without any guarantee, to wherever in the world we are going next.

Red Shoes

OK, I lied: this book is also a little bit about how angels learn to sing.

If our profession is in crisis, this won't come near to solving things. I never meant it to do that.

Bricolage, then: some of this, and some of that. Nothing pure, but whatever is at hand and what will work. If you need a screw and you only have a wire, why wail? Maybe it's not elegant, maybe your department theory head will think you devious or simple-minded. But it is functional, and what have writers ever fully relied on anyway if not what Levi-Strauss calls the "collection of oddments left over from human endeavor" (19).

From psychology, for example, we take the term "hypnogogic hallucination"—those strange half-waking dreams that come to us before we fall asleep. Our students, when we tell them such images can be both visual and aural, may regard us queerly, but they listen.

From other writers, we take the story that the writer always knew, from a very early age, that she or he wanted to grow up and be a writer, and now he or she is. It wasn't always easy and it didn't happen at all the way she or he thought it might, but what it was, it was about words.

Still other writers tell us we should listen to the voices.

In my own life, before I started hearing voices for my writing, there was a pair of high-heeled shoes floating in the darkness just beyond my reach late one night as we drove back through the upper Sacramento River Canyon toward home. The shoes were red and I was ten. Across the river, black humps of mountains, fringed with the feathery shadows of trees, rolled in fluid ribbons along a sky smattered with stars, while inside the car I contemplated shoes no one in my family had ever owned or worn. They were so red they seemed to glow, and, though I knew they were not real, they filled me with longing.

This was my first remembered hypnogogic hallucination, and when I write I think I am to some extent always working to the memory of those red shoes that mysteriously appeared one night in the mountains when I was a little girl, the tonality of them, and my desire.

Some kids know things about themselves. Of my own two sons, Joey plans to be a professional skateboarder, while Sam once set his sights on UCLA so he could live at home when he went to college. Me, I wanted, for the longest time, to be a nurse, and then one day I didn't anymore. I wanted instead to be a writer.

Sadly, despite my own experiences in the arc of becoming a person who writes (see Chapter 4, "Begin by Beginning Again"), I did not always know what I think I know now. When I first started teaching, I thought that my job, as I had been trained, was to teach how to write a "publishable literary story." It was not a very complicated charge, and I got good at it. Students with "talent" took off the way Sam learned to swim. They looked at good writing and you could almost hear them thinking: *I can do that.* Then they did. It was painless, and it was effortless. But this is not what writing is; I don't think that anymore.

Maybe it is easier to know what writing isn't. Knowing (and teaching) what it is and how to do it is the hard part. So what you do, you take your own red shoes, you take your writing history, you take all the useful concepts you ever heard from theory, you take some exercises and everything you think you know, and everything you don't, and you tell a lot of stories and you make your own weird blend of writing and theory and praxis.

And then you give it over to your students and you listen back to them.

And I guess what you want to be thinking is: *Why didn't anyone ever tell me this?*

In this way, we will start to tell each other what we always wish we heard and transform together what we used to know of creative writing as an academic discipline.

OK, and maybe just a little bit of angels, for whoever else in the world could have been wearing those red shoes?

2 Considering the Fishbowl

This essay locates a critical site for teaching in what it examines as a simulacrum of writing between speech and silence. In particular, it dismantles our longing for authority and certainty, and questions received ideas about what might constitute a "natural good" in both writing and teaching. If we continue classroom practices that merely reinscribe those we learned as students, then we fail to allow for the possibility of what lies beyond the already known. But our students are not mirror reflections of ourselves, any more than we were once reflections of our teachers, and to acknowledge that their motivations for and aspirations in writing may be different from our own is to open writing up in complex ways. The stories in this essay chronicle my own developing awareness of this simulacrum as a teaching fulcrum and argue for a reconception of our very sense of what teaching creative writing can be about.

When I was an undergraduate at Santa Cruz more than twenty years ago, I was painfully shy and self-conscious, having matriculated midyear and being a junior transfer from a small town at the north end of the Sacramento Valley where I had learned to match my socks to the color of my blouse and bobby-pin my hair back from my face. Like a deer in headlights, I felt stunned by what I would later learn to call, with Jane Bowles, the "dreaded voyage out into the world" (396).

Though I could not have known this then, my paralysis stemmed directly from the ongoing struggle between speech and silence, a struggle lodged in language itself, and one that defined my experience not just as a writer, but also of self. The whole problem of talking at all, never mind writing, was so complex and mystifying that I literally did not do it for years. Maybe you recognize this moment: that stubborn fist of muteness balls up in your throat, and you go blank-faced and panicky and dumb, disappeared.

When I read the part in *The Woman Warrior* where Kingston musters up the courage to buy commemorative stamps, I didn't think, *Poor girl,* I thought: *Aha, that's what they're called!* This was a tiny breakthrough in language through which I learned the secrets of buying stamps myself—love stamps and flowers, breast cancers, Fulbrights, rocket ships, dancers, and all other sorts of women warriors I could choose.

In those days, Santa Cruz was known for an enormously popular course called Birth of a Poet. Because poets seemed mysterious and powerful to me then, I was fascinated by this course, which I thought about often but never enrolled in, never even went to the standing-room-only round lecture hall in the redwoods on the far other side of the campus where the poet held forth once a week and spread his arms. I imagine him now as I knew him later, tall, with long, steel-gray hair and fringed leather vest, worn Levis, and with a silver whiskey flask askew in his back hip pocket. His arms spread.

In fact, I was obsessed with this course. Almost everyone I knew had taken it, and when they talked about it they would get this particular look in their eyes, as if dreaming of their own capacities. But I had my diffidence instead, and so hung back alone in my coffin-shaped room above the blue Monterey Bay and drifted off over Yeats or Eliot or Melville, imagining the poet's keen spell. What I wanted more than anything was to dream myself under it. I imagine myself imagining it possible. But I was young then still, and had no way of knowing that it was just a course, the same as any course. And the poet was only a poet. And I was just me.

As a teacher myself now, I suspect that at least some of the popularity of this course might have been attributed to its lack of any formal requirements, though I also know that there were countless students devoted to the poet. And it was these students I could not be among, because I did not feel entitled to whatever in the world I believed was unfolding for them.

There was another course at Santa Cruz—American modernism—where I knew I could take notes at the back of the class, not required to speak or be seen. I carefully planned my spring schedule around it, but failed to count on a professor so temperamentally ill-suited to the profession that he was leaving it for good come June to drive around the country in a van, writing novels and making fine wood furniture. But for this one last term, the professor announced, he would be canceling class sessions to hold private weekly tutorials with each of us instead, as he wanted, this one time, to really reach us, really teach us. The next time we saw him, the professor was disheartened, for he'd been talking with the poet who taught Birth of a Poet and who'd insisted you can't ever know, you can never really tell, whose life has been transformed by your teaching and whose has not. It could be the guy in the back of the class, the poet had said, who comes only once and looks like he's sleeping but who hears, really *hears*, what you have to say.

Years later, through an odd set of circumstances, I had the opportunity to attend a daily session of an abbreviated (two-week) version of Birth of a Poet, which turned out to be a series of confessional meditations. In his vest and worn Levis, tall, and with piercing blue eyes, he was a powerful figure, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity, at last, to hear him. But the wisdom I had waited more than half a decade for was not as I imagined it, was instead so much more frankly personal that at least one of the young male fiction writers in my group had to leave the room abruptly, as he confided later, to masturbate in private. Listening to the poet, I was deeply saddened to know that I'd been right after all, for in this familiar model of the writer I had more in common with the seduced than the seducer. Where, in this icon, was there any room for me?

I have many stories I tell about my writing life. It is how I know myself, a way of fixing memory and keeping the odds and ends of things together. In that, I am not unlike the poet. But every story has a narrator and a narratee, and where the narratee is positioned in relation to the narrator marks the manner of the story, how it moves. We sat on the floor at the feet of the poet. Hands sometimes clasped behind his back, sometimes gesticulating, he paced.

The teacher whose experience of self-narrative is grandiose will tell stories at a distance to what is sometimes called a zero-degree narratee, whose singular function it is to receive and decode. In such a relation, the student is effaced. The teacher, like the poet, thrusts his ego where it has no business being.

Disappointed in the poet, I thought for a while *no more stories*. I thought creative writing could be like chemistry: a complicated language you could master, and then wonderful reactions. Soon I had my students choking on words like *proairetic* and *heterodiegetic*. But frankly, this had me choking too, and it wasn't long before I understood that I had simply substituted a Particular Body of Knowledge for the Figure of the Poet, while effect was largely the same.

Plus, I depend on narration for knowledge.

And so in time I came to understand that it is not story itself that necessarily displaces the listener, but (as a writer I had always known this) how it is told. Is it a gift—something I give to you? Or is it instead an opening in discourse? I like to see my stories as invitations to explore with students what we share in common. Narrative is at least one way of saying who I am and why I'm doing what I'm doing as the teacher, a multidiscursive, metapedagogic model derived from an open-ended methodology of teaching that is inside and outside itself at once.

I no longer remember when I realized that the myth of my professors was a lie, but it must have been well into graduate school, or beyond. Despite his deliberate tweed and worn elbow patches (or, as in the case of the American modernist, his black motorcycle leathers, or the poet's extravagant fringes, for this was the seventies), this professor's power lay not in what he wore but in his authority and the implied value of his natural knowledge.

Was it power, authority, or knowledge that I wanted, as I felt myself shoved into silence at the back of the class? Muted by the man I wanted more than anything to please, I found myself caught in a desperate double bind that could be undone only by the dissolve of the myth that held him where he was in the first place. There is that. And there is also that years later I somehow found myself on my own in the world that had once been entirely this professor's (whose jacket now seemed not endearing but frayed), and still caught up in my lifelong struggle to find a voice, any voice at all.

Many of the stories I tell in the context of my teaching have to do with this struggle.

They include the kinds of things you're not supposed to tell your students, up to and including my own uneasy conversations with diffidence and other forms of inadequacy.

They are personal, like the love poem my husband showed up with to read at our wedding on the morning thereof, which extolled the virtue of the loved one's silence, since it was the same as her absence.

An object lesson, yes, about the ways in which even some of the people we love construct and depend on our silence, but also a merging of private and public, a way of bringing my whole self to class, and to laugh about it too—all together.

They are anecdotal, like the writing teacher who once told us that to be a writer all you had to do was to sit at your desk four hours a day. He said it didn't matter if you wrote anything or not, just that you sat there, because eventually, he assured us, you'd become so bored that you *would* start to write. Then he added, "Be sure to let your wife know not to disturb you." The teacher, who was tall, looked down on me benignly.

Another object lesson about how power (someone else's) and silence (one's own) are interdependent, because it does help to know that you're not the only one, that your teacher too has been made to feel misshapen and wrong. Such a lesson may be framed as feminist insofar as it draws from nurturing instincts, just as I tell my children stories about my own childhood crises to somehow assuage theirs.

"When I was little," I begin.

But we are not our students' mothers, and serve instead as touchstones against which they will measure themselves. For this reason, we must come before them as flawed and vulnerable—and resilient—as we really are.

Speech, itself, finally is the issue—and the ongoing struggle that, when I was a student, in class after class, shut me down. As teachers, if we are to create pedagogies where such silences do not descend, we must renegotiate the various placements and displacements in our classrooms that accord some students voices, others not, even as we acknowledge our own role in the process. This can be risky, for of course the dissolve of the myth of the professor (a little like the death of the author) depends upon our own dissolve. And though at first it may seem as if something has been lost in this formulation—some sense of our own power, for example—in time something else will be gained—immediacy, openness, shared learning.

As a writer, when I came to experience myself not as an "owner/creator" but as a kind of locus where language and stories simultaneously occurred, I learned to know another self, constructed in the act of writing, who nurtures all my other selves. Writing thus became an organizing principle of my identity and a primary experience that is at least of equal value to whatever I produce.

As a teacher, when I came to experience myself as separate from the myth of the professor and stopped trying to dispense any particular body of knowledge, I learned to experience the classroom as a site of codiscovery and learning. This movement toward expanding the possibilities of what can happen in our writing and our teaching begins with rejecting the basic concept of mastery, and it ends—I am not sure it ever ends.

At the large, once-suburban but increasingly urban-identified university where I teach, we have a senior-level theory requirement for creative writing majors. By the time students take it, they may have had a variety of literature classes, an introductory course in creative writing, a major critical theories course, and anywhere from two to five upper-level creative writing workshops in one or more genres. It is a class where we look at authorship, language, structure, discourse, genre, ideology, writing, all from a writerly perspective. In it, we often respond to critical texts with alternative forms and "creative writing." First we name things, and then we ask questions about them, in order that students should develop an awareness of writing as a discourse in the world, and so achieve some authority in relation to their own work.

So I begin, "What's a story?" And the question is sometimes confounding because unexpected and new. I do not ask in order to get any kind of answer we can all agree on, but rather to share in the process of framing a discussion. In other respects, what I am talking about are methodologies of inclusion and an organizing structure of a both/and vision.

Take a student, any student, and tell her: *Write a story*. Because she cannot see the fishbowl, she is stuck inside her own internal concept of what a story is and will disappear entirely into it. Ask her what a story is, and she will have to get outside that concept and think about its various dimensions. She will have to struggle with making the concept of *story* her own, and the answers she comes up with will make sense to her in a way that those you give her never will. She will have to consider the fishbowl.

So a "story" may turn out to be one thing for one student, and something altogether different for another. And though perhaps we are supposed to see our project as defining a hierarchy of value, it seems more critical to consider the expressive and aesthetic needs of a whole diverse class, a complex and delicate balance in which hangs the tension between speech and silence.

Begin by rejecting the assumption of "natural value" in what we do: in writing, literature, scholarship, art. Our first task is reassessment, as we proceed by problematizing writing itself: *What is it? Why do we do it? How? Where is there pleasure and value in it? In what ways may it continue in our lives?* As teachers, we know that exclusively teaching high literary art, or popular fiction, or minimalist aesthetics, or radical or conservative poetics, or any one privileged voice over any other is the single surest way to silence those for whom that art, fiction, aesthetics, or voice is alienating. So we can say that one primary challenge must be to provide students with the critical skills and acuity to dismantle their own modes of alienation.

My husband laments the decline of objectification.

"Art," he says, "is objective."

And I do love this man who, even now, can still say so—his stubborn commitment to absolutes, the tenacity he shares with a whole generation of so many men surprised by a course of history that refuses anymore to organize itself around the way things have always been. Split off from their familiar sense of tradition and stability, these men have a hard time understanding that this politics of inclusion they reject is driven not by anger or dismissal, but just by those who never knew a place at the center to begin with and who want, at long last, to know themselves as well as others: *women and other marginal groups.*

Women and other marginal groups.

I listen to myself and imagine I must sound, to some, as if bent on disenfranchising those who once owned the culture, and in so doing, on diminishing culture itself. By "owning the culture" what I mean is the ability to see yourself and your values reflected in the culture's highest artifacts, its arts and literatures and scientific discourses. But if you cannot locate yourself in these cultural texts, you have three options: to turn away from textuality altogether; to give yourself over to the master's texts; or to break open language and relearn it on your own terms.

There was another teacher at Santa Cruz, though, a tiny, fifty-something pixie, with wild white hair she'd come to the time in her life not to give a whit about, a frenzied mop that, like her breasts beneath her t-shirts, flew about as she broke into laughter from her yoga-style perch on whatever table, threw her hands up in the air as if to punctuate her failed sentences. It was her aim, she told us, never to ask a question she already knew the answer to.

My husband also was her student, and like me he left her classes never quite knowing what had hit him, though this disequilibrium upset him, while I felt keenly exhilarated to have seen a way of being I never knew existed yet recognized at once. Even so, I wouldn't know for years that where she had been headed in those days was clear outside of language, that that was where I wanted to go, too, and that, though there wasn't any way to get there, not for her and not for me, what counted was the going, and the keeping on going.

Now, I perch on tables, too, run my hands through messy hair, and grope for language, increasingly convinced that my role in the classroom is less even about questions and answers than it is about providing a structure within which students can come to know themselves as writers. For their part, they just want to write, and we should let them, but not without providing a context that sustains enough critical perspective for a clear examination of writing, up to and including the possibility of change, of disruption, and of the insertion of new subjects.

I have the distinction of teaching at the epicenter of the worst disaster ever to befall an American university. *January 17, 1994, five o'clock in the morning, 6.8 on the Richter scale.*

"Get the boys," I yelled to my husband, leaping out of bed and running to their bedroom where I gathered up Joey, then five, in my arms and crouched with him in the shuddering doorway. When the shaking stopped more than forty seconds later, my husband was still searching tangled sheets for Joey, while Sam was still patiently waiting to be rescued. In the relative silence after the roar of the earthquake itself, we listened to wailing security alarms and wondered how to move through the darkness toward comfort.

Twenty-six miles away in Northridge, my colleagues and students huddled in rubble.

When spring semester opened, it was only two weeks late, and even those of us who remained skeptical of our new "campus in a box" were impressed. Just four weeks after the event that had leveled a significant portion of our campus and buried and burned the work of our colleagues, we were offering courses for more than twenty thousand students, many of whose lives had been so completely devastated that any form of order, even in a box, was miraculous. Under a tree that first day, I found myself shouting, as if to convince myself, over the noise of construction, and as, in the next lot over, a multilevel parking structure continued to settle, girder by collapsing girder.

In the days and the months that followed, what people talked about was noise. At first it was the noise of the actual event: like a thousand freight trains bearing down on you or, as one canyon dweller reported, in the predawn darkness, an unearthly silence, followed by the roar of a terrible wind just before his house started sliding down the face of a cliff.

Later, on campus, noise came from the endless clearing away of rubble and perpetual construction, through the thin walls of our trailers, and in our long lists of complaints. Students said it was the same for them at home, even four months later, there was never any silence, especially late at night when the crews worked double time. One day I watched a truck loaded with heavy equipment—a concrete drinking fountain dangling out front—roar down a campus pathway close to the backs of three students, the driver leaning on its horn, which was blaring. I thought: *Someone should tell someone Northridge has the largest population of deaf students in this country.* The students did not move aside or change their languid pace.

Then I thought: *One more thing we have lost here is our ability to filter out noise.* It was all noise now, all around us, deafening. And I think this is somehow related to how students experience learning what we, by force of habit and despite ambivalence, call creative writing.

When I first started teaching I used to tell people that my goal as a teacher was to "disorient students sufficiently so as to force them into a new space for writing." I liked the sound of it, which seemed both postmodern and poetic, and it worked until a wiser colleague suggested there might be a difference between productive and nonproductive forms of disorientation. These days, it still seems important to generate excitement from a sense of newly emerging possibilities, but somewhat more gently, as I've long since rejected the language of force or disorientation, which, in retrospect, seems a kind of violence. In such a violence, the teacher grows huge in the student's eyes, for how can the student possibly understand what is happening to herself or himself?

One summer, a forest ranger—no master, it turned out, of language—was trying to describe to my sister and me a way to get from where we were to where we wanted to end up, a place that he said was hard to find. He told us to follow a certain highway north out of town, up a river valley toward the mountains. He said to go past one, then two river forks, then look straight away for the first mountain canyon to the east that would make us think *there should be a road there.* He said, not there, but the next place we'd think *there should be a road,* that's where the road was, and that we should take it.

This is exactly the kind of map-making logic that makes sense to me, and it was a breathtaking thirty-five mile one-way road we took over the mountains that day. But when I think about creative writing, I think that what makes bad noise for our students, the kind of static where you can't hear anything, is their inability not only to see the boundaries as we've drawn them in our various institutions of creativity and higher learning, but also to participate in the logic of our maps. So it cannot be enough to reject that logic ourselves, erase all the boundaries and enthusiastically embrace, say, the virtues of free play, or disorientation, in which case, by extension, it seems clear that my sister and I might never have got back.

Noise is what happens in the aftermath of any major earthquake, and, in some respects, it is a terrible racket, within which we cannot think at all. But slowly, slowly the world reasserts itself until there are moments of lucidity when everything sounds new again, and full of promise. In the wake of such a promise it is not that there are no boundaries at all, but that, over and over, you let the boundaries draw themselves.

Even now, years later, it continues to be both painful and exhilarating as we watch our campus pull itself together, and we are reminded again and again of what was lost, and what still remains. It is ugly, it is raw, it is hard to navigate, but it is still a university, a disrupted site of learning. What we see, students and faculty alike, almost as if for the first time, is not just what holds us together, but the very principles by which what holds us together is enforced—and yes, a form of music, not the first place you think there should be a road, but the next one.

Nearly a quarter century ago, when only a fraction of the current creative writing programs existed and I was preparing to enter the workshop at Stanford, my father, a professional educator, suggested that perhaps we might be training too many "creative" writers in this country.

I thought about it for a minute. Then I promised my father that if by the time I turned thirty, I had not achieved some degree of success in my writing, I would be reasonable and earn an honest living. I had in mind chef school, a small beans-and-rice restaurant. Like my younger son, who's been contemplating two-dollar snow cones on hot Dodger stadium afternoons, I knew a good thing when I saw it. I had plans.

My father, of course, meant something more like: training for what?

Last term two students came to my office. They were good students, slightly older than traditional, highly motivated, and unhappy. What, they wanted to know, was I teaching them anyway? What was my class all about?

I thought back to my father and how pleased he was when I ended up teaching instead, for in his view, as in the view of our own institution, we are first one or the other—teachers or writers. I thought about these students, and how they would have flourished in a traditional creative writing workshop. I thought about how they were assuming, as my father once had assumed, as I myself surely also had assumed when I started out at Stanford, that what you do in a creative writing class is make what I have since learned to call "Literature with a capital *L*," as in Art, as in something you publish in the right kind of place. And I thought too about the whole host of other assumptions embedded in this central one that had got between me and writing, and subsequently teaching, for so many years before I started seeing them at last.

As a woman who spent many years writing the way I thought I was supposed to write, I know quite a bit about failure.

Once, in a fiction, I wrote: *Let me tell this my way. I tried for years to tell it other ways, the way I thought I was supposed to, making things up as I went along, aiming to please you with my metaphors and plots, my rising action-climax-denouement, imagining that I, if I would just try hard enough, could fit myself into the authorized version of the way things are and all the words I worked so hard to learn to tell it that way. But now that I am older I know at least one thing: language, I know language, how it speaks us.*

It's been that same quarter century since Roland Barthes defined writing as an intransitive act; since Michel Foucault proposed his typology of discourse and laid out his concept of the author function, his principles of limitation and exclusion; since Jacques Derrida described his logic of supplementarity as a logic of writing. But say this to students and you get puzzled looks, looks that say why are you doing this to us, looks that may haunt you in your dreams.

And yet I have found it useful to persist, and I continue to teach hybrid classes in which we cross the ever-shifting boundaries between writing, theory, practice, and everything else. In such classes, familiar distinctions blur and fall apart, though it's true I often wonder if this straddling of disciplines is somehow cheating. I watch my other colleagues who believe in the purity of what they do, and worry that I've taken things too far. But most days I don't care, because I'd really rather teach one paragraph of Derrida, Trinh T. Minh-ha, DuPlessis, Barthes, or any of various others, if that paragraph could spark writing, than all of Aristotle, whom students will learn elsewhere.

I say that. And then I also say that whenever I talk about writing and teaching writing and writers and students, things I do, and have witnessed, and know, I always pause on *what I know*, since I'm not always certain, and I wonder, for example, where it comes from, this particular knowing, and in that exact moment the question undoes what I thought for an instant I knew. Certainty, like mastery, begins a closing down of what is possible, and in general is as bad for teaching as it is for writing. But if writing can instead be seen as an archaeology, a stripping away of stratified forms of both language and knowledge, then surely teaching must be as well.

One possibility is that I am, after all, a poser and a charlatan, perpetually on the cusp of being found out. Another is that, in the relative security of my own classroom, I have finally found a space where I can be a bad girl, letting students see me as myself. Another is that since we depend, for our speaking, on a context that privileges us to speak, it is possible, and in some sense even necessary, that the creative writing classroom can become a truly democratic site where all our voices slip into that slender gap in discourse together.

Perhaps we can say that teaching writing is a lot like unpacking voices from a complex crate constructed like a Chinese puzzle box.

And then, it's like letting them loose.

Here, for example, is what some students have said, among whom I hear as well the proliferation of other voices, other students, speaking together at once:

> If I see writing as a social act some of these burdens are lifted. The walls begin to crumble down. I'm composing at the keyboard now even as we speak. We are having a conversation.—Debra Poulsen
>
> Thanks for making the invisible, visible.—Peggy Woods
>
> I want to tell you, you who I do not know and cannot see, that words have never come easy for me and speaking was often times very difficult . . .
>
> I want to tell you this because if you knew me, you would know this and you would realize how much writing has come to mean for me, how much the words have helped me, are helping me to understand my world. Learning how to write, learning how to let my words fill an empty page, learning how to listen in between my

silence—this new language, these new words, they have changed my life.

Imagine silence.

Imagine learning how to write in a classroom where words are not the force that shapes you but rather the tool by which you find your shape. Imagine being given tools to find your shape. Imagine learning in a classroom that what is inside of you really does matter and yes, it is important, so important. Imagine finding other peoples' words and hearing other students' voices and learning of the world through their eyes, in their words. Imagine feeling someone's trust and being taught to strive, to reach inside yourself, to open up your mind and find your own thoughts, your own words.—Julie Coren

This writing assignment was unlike anything we'd ever tried before . . . [because its goal] was to allow language to act upon us, instead of the other way around. And the other way around is indeed how I've been writing all my life.—Ronald Ortiz

I am writing in a room full of people, all talking simultaneously. In this present of my writing I sit, in my room of voices, writing, by lamplight (or the light of the computer screen), creating (or is it interpreting?) the present as it relates to, and arises from, the language that constitutes who and where in the world I am. My room of voices is composed of language, and becomes the text which I find myself writing.—Glenn Dwiggins

I believe that my work is not mine, as I believe nothing is mine. It is impossible to communicate without using our language in an archaic way, so many of the words imply hierarchy, imply power, imply structure—I guess they all do in some way. I guess they always will. I think of the difference between positive and negative suffering. Our language has not evolved in the way that our philosophies have. Language is forever trapping us if we let it—and how can we not. Most of the time we can only sit in our traps and entertain ourselves in some way; it is rare when we get the chance to leave our cells. (Scary prison metaphor ends now). We need to recreate our myths so that we can stop alluding to the rings of hell; there is so much more in life.—More what?

The more I understand the better I feel (this is probably not true) but there is no turning back now Dorothy.—Eric Kintler

Me never saying anything and never being able to say anything. Me shy in a world much too big and seeming much too complicated. Complicated like my folks, their loves, their sometimes love for me. The inconvenience of me. My invisibility. Here I break one silence.—Ann Holley

(My husband's) control over my life became so pervasive that I worried what he might do if he found the diaries. I burned them all, and stopped writing.—Donna Marsh

I walked through the open gate, back into my language this semester.—Marion Heyn

As I wrote, picking a sentence here and there from the old story, strange things began to happen. A river crept in, starting with a trickle and ending with a torrent. Boxes appeared, and reappeared. Gardens took root and grew. I wrote in a frenzy, never returning to edit until I reached the end. When I did go back to edit I read the sentence aloud. In this way, I heard what the story was saying; it built into a crescendo, ended quietly; a lot like life and death. And even though it might be more important to make something than say something, I think the revised story said what I had initially been trying to say.—Margo McCall

I feel better now that I have (re)claimed myselves.—Traci Wise

I arrive, naive and hopeful, in my (first) graduate writing workshop and stumble upon a "been there, done that" professor who claims that there is nothing we or anyone, for that matter, can write that will impress him. What is, (after) all, left to be written? He's been at the university some (forty years) or more between his student and professional life, he tells us. And (while) he remains unimpressed with our feeble efforts, we, of course, are enamored by his probing questions, his piercing insight. Only (later) do I wonder if perhaps he's been too (long) at the fair.

. . . It's theory (finally) that . . . gives me a way to (start again), that authorizes my experiments, that helps me (begin) to understand the conventions and how they limit and control what can and cannot be said.—Ilene Miele

I'll borrow this language like an old hand me down pair of shoes, not even mine, and I'll put my feet in, bring to language what I'm so afraid of losing—my body, these limbs dusty from the trail, burnt by the sun . . .

The words were never really the problem. I like the way they vibrate in my throat and fill my mouth. The rhythm. Stopping here, without the rhythm of my boot soles, I can feel each word this way, my body absorbing them, the way it does this sunlight, deep into my blood, my rhythm, fusion, like a kind of jazz, we dance.

If I can borrow these boots to see the world then I can borrow this language to give it all back. I am still here inside these boots. Still here before this language. This will never change no matter how much I speak. Like the growing of grass will never exhaust itself.—Kim Guthrie

So yes, at first they may look at you that way. And then they will start making their own noise.

The two students I mentioned above, who came to me that day wondering what my class was all about, each arrived at a separate conclusion. The young man said, "It's like you're pulling the rug out from under us, and not replacing it with anything else." The young woman said, "Don't you see, she's offering us total freedom."

Of course the truth is that between one extreme and the other what I'm trying very hard to provide is a context within which students may hear themselves speak, write, sing. I believe that even my father, who was really only trying to protect me, can recognize the value in this.

For who'd have thought that almost twenty years later I'd come around full circle to his view of things, and grow skeptical myself about this country's need for more creative writers—as in Art/Literature makers. Art has its own way of being in the world, and I don't know one way or the other about that. Because alternatively we can all of us be artists, living a rich life in language, joining the anonymous murmur, writing. It's not a bad exchange when you think of it. And if, in our creative writing classrooms, we can teach our students not only how to pay passionate attention to language in their lives, but how that language—theirs and others they must use—moves through the world, it may be that, whatever form writing finally takes in their lives, it will not end for them as it has for so many others.

Maybe that's a small thing, I don't know, but among those other papers I found a note that ended:

> I have this big lilac bush and because of where I live the winters are cold and every spring the lilac bush blooms. One spring I was going to bring you lilacs. It is such an odd thing being a student, what is appropriate and all that. There is this too, if I were a woman it would have been easier to give you flowers. Then I thought I would sneak them to your office in a paper bag, leave them anonymously and then I worried someone would see me, and that seemed so devious. Then I thought you might be allergic to lilacs, or maybe the baby, and it all became mind boggling. The truth is lilacs are pretty and they smell sweet and I thought you might enjoy them. What I'm trying to say is that I couldn't give you such a simple thing as lilacs. Isn't that odd and after you have done so much.

Between flowers and a voice—*many voices—of your own (whose?)*—which would you choose? (Though I must say lilacs would have been nice.)

3 Teaching Creative Writing If the Shoe Fits

This essay, chronologically the earliest in the book, comes from the height of the theory/creative writing wars, of which it was a part. In particular, it argues that theory may yield insights into writing that can problematize our discipline in rich and complex ways. Theory may also provide a discourse and structure within which we can reframe our encounters with textuality itself, and thus move beyond our earliest conceptions of creative writing teaching as a training ground for publishing. And it may turn the lens in such a way as to enable us to see ourselves and what we do with a difference important for students.

But there are two more things.

The first is that this essay also comes from a time when I was still conflicted over issues of authority, which I believed I must somehow assume. It is therefore less easy with its multidiscursivity and tends to frame its arguments in more familiar ways. If it sounds different, it is because it marks the beginning of my journey.

And the second is about those wars. Sometimes I think they are over; sometimes I think they won, or we did. Mostly, I see creative writing as a still-vexed discipline, where incremental change is more likely than any transformation. Also, I am not convinced transformation is in order anymore, since it presumes consensus and, as in many things, our diversities continue to be among our greatest strengths.

I started out my professional life as a teacher knowing exactly what to do, absolutely confident I would be good at it. In fact, I believed, I already was. My better-than-ever-expected job offer in a tenure-track position teaching creative writing at a large state university was proof of that. Or was it? For the other side of my conviction that I had finally succeeded was my continuing suspicion that I was about to be discovered as an imposter. How was I to reconcile this all too familiar (and common) ambivalence?

In retrospect, I am surprised by how little thought I gave to the vast amount of classroom time I was facing, not to mention the students themselves. Though I would have strongly denied this, I suspect I had at some point implicitly embraced the prevailing attitude that students were dim-witted and something of a nuisance. All that bad writing to read. What would happen to my own creative/writing time?

"The poet may prolong adolescence into retirement by dealing only with the products of infant brains." (Donald Hall, qtd. in Sanders 10)

"Lord, I'm plumb tuckered out lugging these hunks of pork up the lower slopes of Parnassus." (Theodore Roethke, qtd. in Sanders 10)

My penchant for irony has gotten me into more trouble over the years than I care to admit. Recently, grad students I work with complained that I thought they were dumb.

"It's right there in your essay," they said.

All their work in theory notwithstanding, they misread my narrative stance, and I'm not sure I convinced them I never really meant it: I adore them.

In any event, teaching itself was simple. I had seen that. How hard could it be to sit around in a circle and tell students how to make their stories better. I knew how to make their stories better. If my own early workshops had been painful and discouraging and my latter ones vaguely disappointing—showcases for the most gifted writers, flogging grounds for everyone else—I would add a critical language to the preexisting framework.

Hence, my early creative writing classes condensed into three or four sessions the essential principles of narratology as I conceived them to be useful for writers. In them, I introduced concepts of story and discourse, order, temporality, focalization, structure. I talked about the narratee, narrative strategy, narrative stance. I taught that writing proceeds from language, which is itself a system of signs, governed by rules and conventions, and not a transparent medium through which we reflect on the world. And I quoted Richard Hugo: "If you want to communicate, use the telephone" (5). My aim was that students learn to view their texts as autonomous literary artifacts, separate from their real selves and subject to analysis. So I started out with them, as François Camoin had started out with me: if you want to build a fun house, a set of working blueprints would prove useful.

But here again, I hesitate, unsure how to proceed.

In part, I am concerned that, having long since abandoned the idea that it is appropriate or useful to tell students how to "make their stories better," I may unintentionally end up being prescriptive here. But my problem is also one of writing: which of the various stances and voices available to me—academic, personal, teacherly, writerly—do I want to assume? Where can I insert myself here? How will my decisions affect your encounter with this text? In what manner do these words come to you? By what authority?

These questions about modes of existence, subjectivity, and circulation, which I will return to later, make things seem more complicated than I once would have imagined, and I get up, eat some potato chips and ice, do a little wandering, and wonder: Do your students struggle to analyze their textuality? What does it mean if they do?

In my own classes, this is what happened: among the students enrolled in the workshops I was teaching then, a small percentage was writing very well, much better than I had expected in such a large state institution. The literary magazine was flourishing. Graduates were going off to prestigious M.F.A. programs. Some were beginning to publish, even winning awards. A few became personal friends. And I felt good about my teaching: it felt good.

> I began to object to the notion of the teacher as a "text-better-maker" even as I began to realize that what had once seemed self-evident about "good writing" was becoming increasingly vexed. The lives and the work of my students, unlike my own, did not reflect the value I placed, for example, on high literary expression. Nonetheless, I continued to impose my aesthetic on their work for many years. I said things like: "What this story wants to be . . ." "What it needs . . ." "What if you . . ." Even after I knew these incursions into other peoples' texts/stories/lives as colonizations, I kept them up, not knowing what else to say.
>
> Over time, I understood that, more than how to "fix" any given story, students need to learn to read—in general, any discourse, and in particular, literary texts. It is up to each writer where to locate him- or herself and his or her work in relation to the conventions of the discourse he or she has chosen. I am not saying don't "advise" students; but respect them, who they are, and also trust their instincts and decisions.
>
> Additionally, reading a discourse is a skill that can be transferred—from story to story, context to context, time to time in a person's life.

But another small percentage of students was floundering, and the vast majority remained disinterested in my critical frameworks and vocabularies. Some were in the class because they wanted to "express themselves"; others expected easy credit. At first I tried to ignore them, convinced that since I was the teacher my own objectives for the course were more important than theirs. But after a few years of this, I started thinking differently. Writing was my life, and had been for fifteen years before I stood in front of any classroom. Now bodies were passing barely present before me, and in time I had to recognize my own complicity in their inertia.

Since the first graduate degree in creative writing was conferred at the University of Iowa in 1931, the discipline has flourished, and today remains one of the healthiest and fastest growing branches in the whole constellation of English studies. For thirty years, new creative writing programs have proliferated. Associated Writing Programs, an academic organization founded in the 1960s to coordinate and provide professional services for creative writing programs and their graduates, now lists several hundred members. Degrees conferred by such programs include the M.A., the M.F.A., the D.A., and the Ph.D. with a creative dissertation, and must number (conservatively) more than a thousand annually. From the beginning, the goal of creative writing programs has been to produce writers who publish. Secondarily, these writers have been expected to make their living as teachers. Inevitably, the initial explosion of graduate creative writing programs has been closely followed by a parallel explosion in undergraduate programs: creative writing teachers need students to teach.

This is not an exponential expansion that can continue unchecked, and currently a public debate has polarized in response to the resulting excess (was my father really right?) of university-trained writers. On the one side, we lament the glut of "McPoems," and on the other, champion the need for at least a "million poets." While such exchanges may divert our attention, they cannot mask the depth of the unease that has, on the whole, affected the discipline. All the evidence—from contemporary critical theory to our own common sense—suggests that we cannot go on as we have been, but many among us would prefer not to think so. I would argue that acknowledging the necessity for change does not represent the end of creative writing studies, but rather the opportunity to reconceive the traditional goal of such studies—publishing and teaching—as only one of many we can imagine for our students.

First, I want to review the pedagogical framework that has provided stability and order in the discipline since the first classes were developed at Iowa. From the outset, creative writing teaching in the United States has largely conformed to the model of a text-centered workshop where apprentice writers come together to craft poetry, prose, and drama and offer it for criticism to peers and the master writer. As it is now conceived in the familiar institutional context of our postsecondary academic system, creative writing has become so closely affiliated with this view of the "workshop" as to seem nearly indistinguishable from it. While much of the current debate about creative writing teaching centers on the function and value of the workshop, support for its fundamental assumptions remains strong.

We assume, for example, that such workshops will be composed of homogeneous groups of talented students with strong vocational commitments to writing. We agree that the appropriate product of the class will be a publishable literary text in a conventional genre. We assess "publishability" in terms of poorly articulated, but nonetheless prevalent, standards of "good writing." We promote the idea that these standards reflect universal and enduring aesthetic values that exist somehow outside of their cultural construction. We regard publishing in more elevated terms than other forms of writing achievement. We proceed as if writing is somehow a "natural" activity, firmly rooted in talent, which cannot really be taught, but only nurtured. We assure the credibility of the writer as an "inspired," often tormented genius, who presents a special case in the academy. We imagine that creative writing is somehow different from other kinds of writing, and that this difference is described, though not defined, by its resistance to articulation. Perhaps most troubling to me, we foster false expectations on the part of our students—that the "best" writers will eventually emerge, go on to publish, secure teaching jobs, and so on. These are problematic assumptions at the graduate level. At the undergraduate level, they are much more seriously flawed.

For many years, I have argued against the familiar mentor model of instruction that dominates the traditional creative writing workshop, in which the student writer is implicitly encouraged to emulate the master writer teacher (at what can only be the expense of the student writer's voice, if not self). This model has seemed especially problematic in relation to the often-male "mentor" and his female students. More recently, I have begun to see that the ideology embedded in the very way we conduct ourselves as a discipline is alienating and problematic for male students as well. For we need only look at the constitution of our classes, where issues of race, class, and gender are increasingly foregrounded, to know that each of the assumptions I've cited above is potentially damaging to students whose experience of life and whose view of what writing is—as well as what they may desire or expect from it—can differ profoundly from our own. In my own mind, it is not so much anymore an either/or proposition between teaching toward the production of high-brow literary artifacts and some more process-driven concept of writing as self-discovery, as it is a radical presumption of inclusion that proceeds from the image of a vast room full of writers, all writing, all different, all securely enveloped in noisy anonymous babble.

Perhaps it is time to ask ourselves exactly what we mean by creative writing teaching. If the workshop is of questionable, or limited, value, then what alternative methodologies can we conceive for our pedagogy? What might be appropriate goals for our classes? How can critical, cultural, and composition theories inform and enrich our discipline? What might constitute an effective creative writing curriculum at the undergraduate and graduate level? How can creative writing be most productively situated within English studies? What are the ideological assumptions of our enterprise? Finally, what do we want our students to learn?

> "Interdisciplinary activity is not a peaceful operation: it begins *effectively* when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down—a process made more violent, perhaps, by the jolts of fashion—to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is in the domain of those branches of knowledge that one sought to confront." (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 73)

I don't propose to have the answers to these questions—or even all the questions—but one thing, in particular, puzzles me. These have been tumultuous times for English studies in general. Whole new disciplines have emerged simultaneously, often in competition with each other. Once focused mainly on literature, English departments now include such related but disparate fields as composition and rhetoric, critical theory and textual studies, professional writing, teacher preparation, and so on. Given this pronounced transformation and the attendant painful task of self-assessment, it seems curious that many creative writers remain a- or even antitheoretical. Largely unaware of our own institutional history and of the ideological framework of our own teaching and writing practices, we continue to nurture romantic myths about ourselves that critical developments around us long ago eclipsed. If we are seriously to consider the questions I've posed above, then we need to become more informed about the work of our colleagues. A spirit of intradisciplinary curiosity will help us reconstruct our own project to better respond to the needs of all students. And if, as I believe we must, we reject as our purpose the unexamined pursuit of the literary artifact, then surely we must also reimagine our expectations not just of our students and their work, but also of ourselves and our own work, at least within the context of our discipline. To the extent that theory helps us explore such possibilities, it belongs in our classrooms, on our own terms and for our own purposes.

> "Today our problem is more with the critics of critics: with those that bite or bark at their own kind, not only in their 'rage to get things right,' but also in order to idealize creative genius or to separate out, bureaucratically, the functions of the critic and the artist." (Hartman 211)

Yet, even now, we continue to resist it, and I have to wonder: *What are we afraid of?*

Once, I believed our suspicion (which is met in equal part by many of our colleagues in theory) was grounded not in fear so much as in misunderstanding. Now, less naively, I suspect it proceeds directly from questions of power—who has it, who doesn't, and how and why we try to keep the appropriation and distribution of it throughout the discipline, both at large and in its particular instances, roughly as it is. That it took me more than twenty years of formal education and several in a tenure-track position to begin to ask these questions suggests how parsimonious we are about these things.

Lest we assume these issues have somehow resolved themselves, I had an e-mail yesterday from a student who complained, dismissively, that I wanted to talk about "world views," while he wanted to talk about "words." It is a lovely idea, to imagine that we can take the words out of the world, but where would we put them, I wonder.

These days, for a variety of reasons and to varying degrees, theorists seem more powerful than creative writers, who tend, on the whole, not to like this. We write the texts and outnumber them. They should come to us, ask us about us. We're going on right under their (very long) noses.

And yet theorists still refuse to organize their work with our "creative genius" at the center. In fact, don't they say there's no center at all?

Derrida said he never said there was no center; he said the center was a function.

I can't tell: are we miffed, or jealous?

Maybe this debate is beginning to seem old. It has already been more than a decade since Peter Stitt and Marjorie Perloff exchanged anti- and pro-theory views in what was then called the *AWP Newsletter*. In by now familiar rhetoric, Stitt wonders why we can't just be civilized about literature and writing anymore, and Perloff responds that what Stitt construes as "civilized" is merely an ideological product of the dominant culture. But in the end both miss a vital point.

"Theorists," Stitt argues, "are not special people possessed of a special and difficult body of knowledge. They are people who read weird texts while riding on hobby horses of their own devising" (5).

"Yes . . . ," Perloff responds, "and they also *write* weird texts of their own devising" (3).

True enough, but we should also recognize that neither are "creative" writers special people, possessed of a special and difficult talent. Stitt says "pull [the theorists] down, muss their haberdashery" (5). Why not muss our own black jeans or Guatemalan t-shirts? By maintaining a sense of irony, humor, and perspective about our own activities, we may gain a new and more playful access not only to theory, but to writing itself.

Of course, "play" can be as threatening as the other, more "serious" side of theoretical discourse. Both spring from the same will to power, authority, and mastery that drives the most ambitious among us. And I don't know. Forced to choose between one extreme and the other, I might (or might not) find myself on the side of those creative writing teachers who would fiercely guard their students against the theory virus. Let them, they argue, just write. But it is exactly our insistence on such polarities that maintains creative writing as the most undertheorized, and in that respect, anachronistic, area in the entire constellation of English studies.

The either/or logic of binary thinking impoverishes our discipline if it shuts off the complex contributions of theory. Since some of these contributions profoundly challenge many of the ways we have conducted ourselves in the past, it stands to reason that those who will resist them most strongly will be those who have benefited most from how things were. As this debate has trickled down from the top ranks of our institution a shift has occurred that demarcates itself along gender and other lines of marginalization. The closer we come to articulating our own experience in our own terms, the more vulnerable the structure of power that has inscribed us as being peripheral. I believe that this is information that belongs in the hands of the least powerful among us—our students, including undergraduates, whose life choices should be based on something more substantive and "reality"-based than the compelling urge to "express" themselves. Finally, I am convinced that such knowledge can empower students to become better, more creative, more interesting writers, and that this self-awareness alone is what may ultimately sustain their writing.

But here's my apology I wear like a convention badge: I'm no theorist, not by a long shot. What do I know about theory, I say? After all, I'm just a writer—a *creative* writer.

In "The Writer in the University," Scott Russell Sanders argues against the elevation of either the theorist or the reader (take your pick) over the author, whose "death" he persists in lamenting. By his logic, theory turns artists into puppets whose "strings are jerked by some higher power—by ideology or the unconscious, by genetics, by ethnic allegiance, by sexual proclivities, by gender, by language itself" (11). But language, "is not a prison house," he argues, ". . . (but) the means of our freedom" (13), which (since we can't change race, class, or gender) we should use to concentrate on "artistic criteria"—the one thing we can "control."

Here's a little story for you: I did not speak in college. *Shh. Foucault asks, "What does it matter who is speaking?"* For four long years I did not speak. *Shh. Does it matter? What does it matter?* I was completely mute. Of course I was a shy small-town girl, so naturally I believed my silence was somehow in me. *Moby-Dick* had taught me I could never be a writer. Who, or what, had taught me I must not dare to speak? Then, five years after Melville and almost out of college, an odd and, in retrospect, revealing thing happened. I met two young men who did not seem to suffer from the same degree of doubt about their talent or intelligence or right to be a writer, and though it was difficult, I decided that if they could take creative writing classes, maybe I could too, and I did.

Even so, it would be another ten years before I learned to question what had once seemed "natural" about who speaks and writes, and who, in effect, does not. That was in a graduate seminar on feminist theory. One day, casually, the professor tossed off the remark: "A person never simply 'speaks,' there has to be a context in which that person feels privileged to speak." At the time, I looked back over all those years of struggle to find a voice, any voice, and I wanted to weep. How had this basic fact escaped me?

"Readers," Sanders assures us, "are not merely playing among signs but are taking in and comparing visions of what it means to be human" (12).

If you could cup it in your hands, this being-human thing, and hold it out to your reader, would you assume your reader would recognize your offering?

When Los Angeles was burning in April 1992, a handful of my students were unable to go home. I remember thinking about them during the several hours I was stuck in gridlock on the affluent west side, trying to get to the safety of my own home, from which we would see smoke now for days, but no actual flames. Much of the gridlock was caused by people like me, going home, but some of it was also caused by people taking little "vacations," going north to Santa Barbara, or south to San Diego, anywhere elsewhere to wait out the uprising. We studied each other in our bought-new automobiles, and I thought about my students whose communities, where I have never been, were burning down and frightening the rest of us.

I've been told since I was a child that I have a very good imagination, but I'm not laying any claim to knowing what it "means to be human" in such a moment as my students faced that day. What I can recognize are the dynamics of domination, enforced silence, and sudden eruption, a claim to articulate the self in terms the master cannot begin to fathom. Thus, when Sanders urges us to concentrate on "artistic criteria" as the only aspect of writing over which we have any "control," I would have to ask: Whose criteria are these? Where did they come from? What version of the "human thing" do they uphold?

These questions are derived from Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?"—that elegant analysis of the institutional processes by which, in our culture, an author is constructed. Though we are accustomed to conceiving of this figure as an inspired genius in whom creativity abounds and from whom an "inexhaustible world of significations" flows, Foucault argues that he or she is instead the ideological product by which our culture "limits, excludes, and chooses, . . . [impeding] the free circulation . . . of fiction, . . . and [marking] the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (159). Thus, Foucault concludes, it is time to stop asking the familiar questions about who really spoke, with what authenticity and originality, expressing which deep part of the self, and begin to ask instead: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions?" (160).

In such a context one must reassess Sanders's logic that the death of the author is hardly a slogan to please a living one, or that we would prefer not to think of ourselves as puppets. For of course when the "living author" has not had free (or any) access to the discourse, it becomes a wholly different matter to see how the puppet strings work not just to control, but also to exclude.

And this is something students have an uncanny instinct for. They know at once that this discourse isn't theirs, that it works to silence them, that they are "women" too in this context. Among creative writers, there are still plenty who hold, with Stephen Dedalus, the burning commitment to "forge within the smithy of [their] soul[s] the uncreated conscience of [our] race" (253). For myself, I don't know, I'm content to let my "race" speak for itself. It's pleasure enough to speak for myself after half a lifetime of self-imposed silence.

Theory helps us recognize the puppet strings. It helps us analyze not *what* texts mean, but *how* they mean; not who we are, but how we are what we believe we are at any given moment; and how, as well, that changes, as it does. This is useful knowledge for writers who, while they're occupied with their analysis, might want to clip a puppet string or two, for play or emphasis, or out of curiosity or a spirit of defiance.

Even so, I recognize theory as yet another master discourse, and am not oblivious to the irony of my affiliation with a discipline that is itself so strictly circumscribed as to seem, at times, impenetrable. Indeed, I remember feeling stunned after nearly failing my Ph.D. prelims in theory (because I couldn't get my mouth around its words), and what I thought, at the time, was that the single remaining post-Derridean privileged object continued to be phallo-logocentric discourse. Even now, who has access to this discourse remains a highly charged issue, with its primary texts still as jealously guarded as the New Critics once guarded Literature.

You could call theory jargon-laden, or you could call it plain bad writing, but I think the functional principle that sustains the stylistic eccentricities of theory is, again, one of power. Theoretical texts tend to locate the reader in opposition to the will of the master theorist/writer, and uninitiated readers may not feel up to the challenge. Like me, in the reading I did for my prelims (for I never had a class in theory and was so intimidated by the theorists in my department I could not go to them for any help) they may, the uninitiated, feel like knocking their heads against a wall. For six or seven years I felt like that. Then, I don't know, I began to think about the "modes of existence of the discourse" and where there were places in it for possible subjects. From there to rejecting the terms of the master, it is only a sigh of relief, in the aftermath of which both writing and learning can truly begin.

Between theorist and reader, it is not a contract that begins: *Sit down, let me tell you a story.* But rather: *You can't catch me, I'm the confidence man.*

Even so, people remain skeptical, and often want to know how I can teach Derrida without, for example, teaching Aristotle first.

One answer, of course, is that I don't. I teach, instead, borrowed (well, all right, stolen—appropriated?) metaphors for writing, like "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire" (Derrida 109), like "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (Barthes, "Death" 168), like "the difference between what we say and what we mean may constitute the only depth in us" (where, oh where, did I read this?), like "At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices, as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance" (Foucault, "Discourse" 215).

Another answer would be: *What does it matter?*

In *Criticism in the Wilderness,* Geoffrey Hartman says that the difference "reading makes is, most generally, writing" (19). What difference, we might ask in turn, most generally, does writing make? It is a good, if loaded, question, for certainly at least part of the distrust between creative writers and theorists can be located in definitions, perceptions, and constructions of writing. We could argue a long time about issues of ownership, authority, and practice, and never come to terms or agree on even so basic a problem as whether we write the writing or the writing writes us. But whatever value this discussion may have for us as writers—and I believe that it is high indeed—we should as teachers be asking the much more urgent question of what difference writing makes for our students. Even to teach them to ask it is a significant shift.

After my almost-failed prelims, my adviser (himself a creative writer, who had somehow "got me by") discreetly suggested that I just not present myself on the job market as competent to teach theory. Nonetheless that's exactly what I ended up teaching, and though in a way I had backed my way in, theory *had* been important to me in graduate school. It taught me how to think and talk about my work within the workshop, and thus provided a much-needed framework within which to pursue certain writing directions I did not fully understand yet. Without the ability to articulate exactly what interested me in these early awkward moves, standard workshop criticism might have muted, or effaced them. Theory gave me permission to hold on to what I was trying out, and while I know many writers still find it dry and difficult, this, I swear, was exciting. Not that I ever really felt I *understood* theory the way I was supposed to, but in private it was such a great relief to know I didn't *have* to be an author, to begin to understand what it might mean to call writing an intransitive act, to recognize stories as convention-driven and ideologically charged, to have access to a language that explained things.

Our students come to us, like our own early selves, full of ideas that are bad for writing. They have internalized vague notions about what stories are, derived from their experience with either nonwritten narrative texts (what they absorb from the culture) or premodern and modern high literary texts (what they are taught in school). They think of writing as an ordeal during which they struggle to find the "right words" to "express" an idea that exists somehow outside language in their heads—what I call "writing backwards." They think writers are people who write, that authors are people who publish, and that getting from the one to the other is simply a matter of accomplishment and talent. They view this whole mesh of effects as both natural and just. Depending on their experience, they see themselves as either "good" or "bad" writers.

For our part, we do little to persuade them otherwise. We tell them, "Write three stories," without problematizing the concept of story. We judge their success or failure by how "good" their work is without adequately defining "good." We proceed as if these are indeed "natural" concepts, without tracing how and why they came into our culture. Often we assume that our students want to be writers without distinguishing between writing itself and the life of a writer as we know it. We encourage them to publish without addressing the practical effects of this pursuit. In the absence of these larger questions, students are as ill-prepared to become professional writers—never mind the whole host of *other* reasons they might choose to write—as we once were. Surely there are ways we might ease the transition for them.

Some years ago at an Associated Writing Programs annual meeting, an exchange occurred between a visiting theorist and a well-intentioned writer who worried openly how he could continue to teach if he were unable to "nurture" his students on the same "great writers" who had nurtured him in his own development as a writer. The exchange made many of us uneasy, for in it we were forced to recognize that between our staunch belief in equal opportunities and our largely unexamined commitment to the meritocracy by which "great" writing is valued, there is no easy middle ground. The visiting theorist assured us that Foucault's own intentions had been humane, that he had meant to liberate us from the principles of limitation and exclusion that maintained literary discourse as elitist. But liberation appeals only to those who lack freedom. To the extent that literary culture in this country has been white, middle class, and male, access to that culture has been determined by how one accommodates oneself to the strategies and values of that culture.

But we live in multicultural times, and while it may be argued that current proliferation of American voices reflects a shift in the historical distribution of power within our institutions of literary culture, I suspect that a quick review of New York publishing lists or the tables of contents of major literary journals will reveal instead that the celebration is as much a construction of liberal guilt and politically correct thinking, or a cynical market determination that multiculturalism "sells," as it is any kind of fundamental change in people's underlying attitudes.

Those of us who came to writing aspiring to express our deepest selves may want to maintain the modernist view of the author as inspired genius. And I don't know. Sometimes it seems that all of us must start out this way, for we are the products of our education and reading. But those of us who have also had difficulty recognizing ourselves in that education and reading will adapt more readily to the notion of author as function. From there to the idea that the self we aspire to express is not natural, singular, and constant, but rather constructed, multiple, and fluid, it is not so far at all, and it is easy.

Assume, then, the latter. Assume that the self—one of many—is constructed in the act of writing, moment by moment, by our entry into language, not our mastery over it. Assume as well that the same may be true when we enter the classroom, that instruction—meaning—is achieved there in the play of signification that occurs *between* teacher and students. Embedded in these assumptions and the ones described above as implicit in the workshop are two different pedagogical stances. One might say, then, that the workshop is the classroom model by which we mark the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.

The first times I taught theory I relived my prelims every time I entered class, and was so intimidated I kept my nose in my notes, reading pages of someone else's words, copiously copied out of books. Then, little by little, I grew accustomed to the words and the ideas. In my own voice they didn't sound so hard. After a while I stopped worrying so much about who properly owned this discourse and what I was "supposed" to do with it, and started playing with it instead as a strategy for writing. And I turned it into little stories that were easier for all of us to understand. Students were responsive. The straight catalog "theory" course became a hybrid theory/writing course as, in it, we began to explore what might happen to our writing when we held it out at different angles and tried thinking about it in new ways.

Even so, I still can't stop myself from apologizing. *I don't really know anything about theory,* I say. *It is just something I bastardize and use.*

"Oh, but I think you do," a colleague once said. He moved to walk away, then turned to add slyly, "I can always tell a Haake product."

I don't know: was he being dismissive, or merely curious about what I "really" do?

What I do is not current. I don't comb the journals and use multihyphenates. I don't even do interpretive models. I just do the old stuff, the stuff that moves writing, is all. Saussure, to begin with. Barthes. Derrida. Foucault. Some feminist, some cultural theory. And, of course, a good bit of narratology. Here's why:

Just yesterday a colleague and a linguist confided that it still takes her more than half of each term to convince her students language does not exist exclusively for the sole purpose of communication. How much easier, she said, it is to look at abstract art than at abstract writing. Even for her, she implied. We just don't expect it to mean in the same way.

If linguistics students are resistant to constructions of language as an object and a system, imagine how much more difficult it may be for creative writing students to relinquish their ideas of the primacy of self and expression, and to accept the basic concept of language as a signifying system that does not point outside itself to something else, but is instead organized according to arbitrary relations of similarity, opposition, and placement. But then again, if, as François Camoin has argued, students who learn they have nothing to speak of, nothing to "say," but only something to "make," will make much better writing (6), then surely it will be useful for them to view language as an object or material they work with, as opposed to some recalcitrant means of communication. It is a simulacrum that, once introduced, allows us to move beyond prior notions of writing.

In such a context, for example, it becomes possible to talk about Derrida's logic of "supplementarity" (see "Structure, Sign, and Play") as a logic of writing. Because of the focus on finished meaning product throughout the educational system, writing often seems somehow static to students, as if it exists in an idealized form prior to its coming into being. Like the Derridean "center," this idealized writing does not exist, and to recognize this absence is to make play possible for student writers. In describing the movement of "supplementarity," Derrida writes: "One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement.* The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more . . ." (119). Writing, as I teach in conjunction with this reading, is a process of "burrowing," of learning to pay attention to the "always more," and to respond to its imperative with, inevitably, more writing.

This is just one way of talking about—of "supplementing"—my basic premise that writing proceeds from language, but students sometimes misconstrue the concept as something they call "stream of consciousness," or just "letting the writing flow." Certainly "flow" is part of it, not as a response to some preconceived purpose but as "flow" responds to and is determined by language itself—the always more of it. Learning to theorize, even in very simple ways, the "supplementary" nature of language and writing gives students a framework within which to break old bad writing habits, and it doesn't take high theory to teach this.

Without attempting to summarize the whole semester, I would add that Foucault's critique of authorship allows students to see a place for themselves in writing they may never have imagined before, even as it motivates them to ask questions about the distribution of power within and across discipline and discourse boundaries. Feminist theory provides a useful ideological critique of language, form, and structure, and it challenges students to take more risks in their writing. Such a challenge need not privilege experimental writing, so much as it may provide the opportunity to explore aspects of language and form that students might not "naturally" encounter on their own. And yes, that old "dinosaur," structuralism, continues to provide a highly functional terminology for students to use in describing their work.

French feminism remains especially provocative, and I still recommend the "Creations" section in *New French Feminisms* (Marks and De Courtivron), which is wide-ranging and manageable. But I also teach Elaine Showalter, Nancy Chodorow, Jane Gallop, Ursula LeGuin, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Toril Moi, Joanna Russ, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and so on. The point in selecting theoretical readings for creative writers is not to cover any particular body of knowledge so much as it is to pose challenging questions. Even so, students may experience this material as difficult, and so it is vital to share both your enthusiasm and your difficulties with them, and to suppress the urge to mastery in general.

Some suggestions: Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*; Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*; Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires, *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction;* and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics.*

To the extent that theory illuminates in some part what we do, it may also transform our thinking about what we are doing when we write, and thus generate a new sense of writing. As an example of how such questions can inform a specific class activity, I might take the "little triangle for the short story." Students typically know this triangle as including a rising action, a climax, and a denouement. They accept it as the way a story is, and struggle, as I once did, to write it. Inevitably, the struggle to master a form precludes important questions about the origins and function of the form. Reading Barthes, we may come to understand that stories *are* this way, at least in part, because they model a form of sexual pleasure we may associate with men. Making this an explicit part of any classroom discussion about narrative structure gives students options they might not otherwise consider. A male student might experience a greater sense of authority and play with the form, while a female student might more clearly understand her alienation from it and begin to explore other formal possibilities, modeled, perhaps, on other formations of pleasures.

Does this make them better writers? It makes them more aware writers, more self-confident, and it gives them a greater range of options. For if ideology is powerful largely to the extent that it remains invisible, students can learn to be powerful, too, in relation to what they learn to "see." In our classrooms, this includes acknowledging, at the very least, that language and literary convention are not ideologically neutral but are instead highly encoded systems by which we are constructed and through which we come to know the world. Such an acknowledgment does not mean there is no world to know; it means we are responsible for knowing, and teaching, how we come to know and represent it.

Beyond that, students are on their own, and it seems to me more and more that our real charge as teachers is to provide them with a critical framework and vocabulary within which to frame their own guiding questions for writing. What, I ask, is *interesting* to *you*? What will sustain *your* interest over the years? For clearly, our first goal as teachers ought to be that writing should continue for our students. And if we are honest, we must also embrace the possibility that students' writing concerns may be different from our own, that their questions—even their desires—may not reflect ours. Doing so might well change the way our discipline conducts itself and lead to a true diversity of voices within it. What might the future of creative writing studies look like then?

The final project in my theory/writing course (indeed, in many of my courses) has evolved into a project that combines critical and creative discourse in such a way that the two somehow illuminate each other. I encourage collaboration, multimedia experimentation, text-based collage, and other forms of play. Over the years, projects have included videos, narratological board games, text-inscribed origami mobiles, quilts, performance art, one elegant "Saussure-o-scope," computer programs for random text generation, songs to break your heart, an illuminated manuscript, and one pair of white tennis shoes, inscribed with the following story and accompanied by this set of instructions:

> **This project comes with instructions: You'll notice that there is a story written on the sneakers that are enclosed. Please put the sneakers on before reading them. Wear them for a day. I realize that it is difficult to read something written on a pair of shoes if you are wearing them so I have copied the story on these pages**

to make everything easier. Please read the following while wearing the sneakers:

Here you are walking down the street in a pair of new shoes. At first it was exciting to receive the strange package but now you are remembering the Indian proverb about shoes and you wonder what you are in for. They fit ok. Almost perfect. While you are waiting for the light to change you move your toes around inside of your sneakers. They are a little rough around your heels but you know they'll break in given time. The early afternoon air is cold so you pull your coat tight around your body.

You turn into Bobbie's Cafe to get some coffee. Bobbie waves "hello" from behind the counter and pours you a cappuccino. You place your hands around your drink and let the heat fill your body through your fingers. On her way back from one of her tables Bobbie notices your shoes. You tell her that one of your students gave them to you as part of a project and you have been walking around in them all day. You stay in the cafe out of the cold for about an hour talking to Bobbie. You talk about feminist literature, the riots and Bobbie's new espresso machine. After promising to come by again next week you make your way down the street.

At the corner by the bus stop you see a man who looks like a professor that you had in college. You remember arguing with him about voice and a female language. You try to picture how your teacher would look now after all this time. You decide that this man does not look like your teacher at all and keep walking by. This man, teacher or not, has brought college back to you and you remember a day as cold as this one wandering around taking a break from studying for finals. You remember feeling lost and scared and unsure of yourself. You think about the student who gave you the sneakers and you wonder if she ever feels lost and doubtful.

You decide that you have had enough with this project and that you are going home. You had left your husband in charge of the kids and you know you have to get back before they wreck the place. Besides there are all those other projects to grade. You stop at a grocery to pick up some fresh fruit for home. A fat lady near the dairy section is staring at your shoes. For a moment you see yourself as if you were someone else. The thought makes you giggle. You tell yourself that they just don't appreciate participatory literature. Hyperfiction—the wave of the future. You've selected and paid for your items and now you are heading home. One more hill and you are there. You think about the story on your shoes and wonder what it would have been like if someone else had been wearing them.

—Vicki Davis

At the end of the paper she added this postscript:

> I decided not to write my comments on feminist literature on paper because that is how men write. Instead I chose to write it on the tongues. It seemed appropriate.

On one tongue, in red, she had written:

> Welcome to the Wild Zone. My Wild Zone is my tongue. I will follow you down until you are haunted by the sound of my voice.

On the other:

> I'm female so I don't have to explain this: Read between the spaces.

On the sole of each shoe, in bold black capital letters, was the single word:

> **AUTHOR.**

My only other question is: *What size shoe do you wear?*

4 Begin by Beginning Again

This essay returns to the struggle between speech and silence as it reviews my own writing education—when writing started, when it stopped, when it began again, and why. In particular, it examines the way art and writing move through the world according to the operations of certain kinds of privilege that may mystify certain aspects of that struggle and so induce silence. By locating the terms of this conflict in their cultural and political contexts, we may open up new possibilities and avenues for speech and expression. The essay also reconsiders the relation between each writer's subject and language as it attempts to balance their respective imperatives. Though in many ways this is an intensely personal narrative, my intent here is to demonstrate the extent to which our silences do not lie within us, but in the world, and to insist that we are not powerless inside them.

If you are a true believer in writing, if you cannot conceive of the body without text, if even your dreams are narrated, you may remember how it began, the first word you wrote, its wobbling lines and round generous curves, the dark graphite mark of *you*. Probably your name, though if your name is long and difficult, like mine, then maybe something easier to master, maybe *mom* or *dad*. Maybe *dog*.

Not too many years ago, as I watched my then-five-year-old son struggle with the intricacies of letters and sounds, I was struck again by the monumentality of it, the imperative inscription of meaning external to the body, its raw power. These days what they do in school is called "inventive spelling." It is as if each child invents each word anew.

Joey wrote: *I lv u.* He beamed, boasting, "I did it all by myself."

If writing is connected in some fundamental way, as I believe it is, to the acutely haunting processes of memory, part of what this writing is about is trying to remember where it started for me, writing in general, the fullness and the urgency of it. There are two basic reasons why I think this is important: (1) Watching Joey, as I watched his brother, Sam, hunker down a few years earlier to his letters, I came to realize that though I can recall with extraordinary clarity the way I learned to read, I have no memory at all of learning writing; and (2) I know exactly when and how it stopped, the writing, I can pinpoint the moment to an hour and a day.

It was at dawn, a hot September morning on the red clay shore of Lake Shasta, beneath the iron arch of a sweeping railroad trestle, with the lake spread out before me, gray and smooth as glass, and everything sallow with the fading light of summer's end. I had been brought blindfolded in the night to this place where I had never been before, hijacked by friends who had planned this surprise to celebrate my sixteenth birthday. Also by way of celebration, I had received, the night before, a dismally formal French kiss from my boyfriend—my first—beneath the street light at the dead end of our block.

I remember waking earlier than the others, still charged, as I often was in those days, by a state of high emotion and the memory of the fleshy bulk, the dry, mealy texture of my boyfriend's thick tongue, the stunning foreignness of his body inside mine. I remember feeling exhilarated and disoriented. After they'd blindfolded me, they'd spun me around until I was dizzy, and then we had driven back roads to this unfamiliar campsite on the lake. We were not in tents, and the world, as it emerged sultry out of darkness, seemed new again and full of promise. I got up and walked to the water. Everything was beautiful, and I felt benignly at peace.

This is where writing ended for me, that morning on the lake, in the strangeness of my body, at dawn. Before the kiss the night before, I'd finally finished *Moby-Dick*, which I'd been reading for weeks. Now, under the spell of Melville's prose and genius, my future, stark as destiny, seemed clear before me. I was neither smart nor talented enough to be, as I had dreamed, a writer. But reading was something I knew I was good at. I could do that: I could read, I could teach.

No, wait.

It's now thirty years since I turned sixteen, and at least four since I first wrote this essay, reworked countless times since then.

If writing is haunted by memory . . .

Now, for the first time writing this, I recognize that campsite as one I had been to on a family picnic when I was four years old and my mother lost her wedding ring and we looked and looked until we found it in the dirt.

Was it a dream I am remembering, or am I writing a remembrance? And how did writing bring me here, to the memory, perhaps dreamed, of my mother's wedding ring in the red dirt by the water where, a decade or so later, I would arrive at the moment of renouncing writing that I would come to write about more than a quarter century later?

For four years after that I did what I planned. I devoted myself to my studies, and I did not write. Then, almost out of college and past the point of changing, I met two young men who did not feel ambivalent about their worth or talent or intelligence in relation to their writing aspirations, and I figured that if they could take creative writing classes, I could too.

I do not tell this story because I think it is unusual. If it is unusual, it is only so because I framed the end of writing as a deliberate renunciation. I was in a lucid state of mind. I sized up my possibilities and knew my limitations. But for countless numbers of people who start their lives writing, writing, at some point, just stops. Often they are women, often in response to years of rejection by gatekeepers ranging from teachers to editors and all along the way, or to the personal disinterest of people they love, or to plain weariness. But sometimes they are bright boys gone quiet out of frustration when things didn't open up for them the way they had expected. Sometimes they are alcoholics or others on the edge, caught on the cusp of the myth of the hard-living writer. In a sense it does not matter who they are. They are people who once had a life in language and do not anymore. I could fill this page, like a memorial, with their names, the names of people I knew, and you could too. Theirs are sad stories, and for each, moving into silence is as particular a loss as it is a widespread cultural phenomenon.

> Sometimes I think the Santa Cruz poet was right: you can't ever know, and must therefore never presume to select, who in your class can write and who cannot. *Shh. What does it matter who is speaking?*

For most of us, by the time we lapse into silence, we are past the point of caring very much. Often, the process is a slow one in which, as if by attrition, the writing diminishes, and then finally ceases altogether. To the world, this seems as natural and inevitable as writing had once seemed to us. Those closest to the writer who stops writing may be relieved, just as their teachers may be vindicated that their job, at least in part, is to separate the "real" writers from the rest.

Too many creative writing teachers see teaching as this wheat and chaff thing. Even Raymond Carver once told me, "You're a real writer," and like Joey with his letters, I left that conference beaming. Later, I learned he'd said the same thing to the rest of the students he'd met with that day. We were all "real writers," and we were all beaming.

When I walk into any given class of new writers, I know that some will be like me, with a lifelong, if troubled, connection to writing. Others will be there because they think writing is a quick route to a B.A., or a good way to get rich and interviewed on TV, or to look exotic and attract a certain kind of romance, or just to be alone. A few will be interested in literary art. What I know too is that every one of the students before me is capable of surprising both me and her- or himself, and that my job as a teacher is to create the structure within which surprise can occur.

"Don't think," François used to say. "Just write."

I thought he was joking until he told me he wrote in the same room with his four-year-old son and the TV, stereo, and radio—all tuned to different channels.

As for me, I was twenty-nine years old and had been writing continuously for the better part of a decade. I had a creative writing M.A. from a prestigious institution and a growing list of small magazine publications. I'd been to conferences with famous writers. I'd even had a government employment training job (those were the days) to write a book about a teenage drop-in center in Chula Vista, California. In all this time and these many writing contexts, no one had ever told me not to think. I resisted stubbornly and argued back.

"Don't tell me what to think," I said.

"Or not," he said.

It was puzzling advice, and I puzzled over it for many years. When I pass it on to students now, they also don't believe me. How can this possibly be? Often, though, over time and for no apparent cause, something loosens up and they begin to listen, sometimes for the first time, to the rhythms and the music of the language in their own bodies. This is such a critical event in any writer's life—the letting go of thinking meaning in the way we think we are supposed to mean—that it can be said to be at least one beginning of writing, though there are many.

More than anything else I learned from François, I was changed by this concept that writing proceeds out of language. What I had always experienced before as a kind of difficult and painful translation had become, through his guidance, something more open-ended and fluid, a continuously unfolding site of surprise. Palpable, material, and with its own economy, logic, and music—language, I was learning, does not just get written but also somehow writes the writer, who is inscribed, being-written, in the moment of the writing. When I came to understand this years later, I was stunned by the force of what felt like liberation, which has paradoxically come to represent a certain steadiness of purpose in my life.

But I have also grown uneasy with the way the word feels in my mouth, that word, all its lambent letters: **L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E**. Imagine Language Poetry. Imagine the word grown heavy with its own self-importance, the slippery way in which what sets us free can also betray us. Remember going tongue-tied and mute before a famous writer, and you know that in some more elevated sense, language, once again, re-represents the exclusivity of Art, another hierarchy, a different/same circle of power.

Recently, a woman in her forties confided that when she finally wrote her first "real" story—not journals or letters, but an actual story—she wrote it in traffic, at stop lights and jams, scribbling words against her steering column and dashboard with a mechanical pencil that kept snapping off.

"Later," she remarked, "I wondered why I hadn't just pulled over, but I knew if I did that it would somehow be admitting I was really writing, and it would stop."

Between me and that woman in traffic there is a whole world of people who feel more a desire for language than entitlement, or even ease. For them, "language"—especially literary language, or any other discourse of power—is like someone else's secret code. It is a simple feeling of exclusion: "real" writers have it, or own it, and they don't. Thus, I have found that pronouncing the virtues of language alone can be just another way of reinscribing silence for many students. Language and: *what?* How do we open up its possibilities without seeming, unintentionally, to reinscribe its privilege?

A few years before I quit writing, a major van Gogh exhibition toured the world. Between where I lived in northern California and where the exhibit could be viewed in San Francisco lay half the Sacramento Valley, one hundred fifty miles of peach orchards, olive groves, walnuts, and rice fields. In autumn, when the rice stubble burns, a low haze fills the valley, compounded by dense tulle fog, and it was through this gray murk that my mother drove my sisters and me five hours to the city. We were in high school, and I—the "creative," or "artistic" one—was especially excited. In San Francisco, it was a brisk blue day as we waited several hours in line at the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park, dressed up in our provincial Sunday best.

What I remember from when we finally entered the museum is its cool darkness after the intensity of sun, and as my vision cleared, dreamlike, the two massive copper-studded leather doors that, every ten minutes, would open to let in another few patrons. The wait, I realized, was not over, but this only increased my awed anticipation, how keenly alive I felt, charged with an unfamiliar energy and something I now call desire. At last, I remember, those doors opened for us. And I remember two more things: my own intense pleasure, bordering on ecstasy, when I first saw the paintings, unlike anything I had ever seen before, and the stunned look on my mother's face.

She was perhaps fifty then—not so much older than I am myself—and a teacher as well, a serious-minded woman to whom it had been so important that her daughters have this opportunity that she had planned it for months: how she would arise in darkness long before dawn, prepare food for her husband to leave warming in the oven as the heavy-lidded girls squabbled and dressed, and then drive alone for hours through tulle fog and stinging rice haze, brave San Francisco traffic and all the other hazards and expenses of the city, to herd her children safely to this exact place and moment, where, just like that, something would give out in her, and her face would go faraway and blank. It was as if Art slapped her, slapped her down. I looked at van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, and then I looked at my mother, going humble and unworthy before them. In that instant, I felt a little panicky for her, and then I turned away, swept along by the crowd, the lure of art, and my own adolescent receptivity.

Looking back, I don't believe my mother could see those paintings at all. Cowed by the shadow of the master, her humility before his work was so profound that she seemed to grow smaller beside me, self-effaced to the point of erasure by the very thing she had come to revere.

Years later, at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., Sam and I—he was five then—found ourselves by chance in a room of huge, larger-than-life photographs. In one heavily ironic piece depicting museum patrons at the Louvre, the photographer had captured, at an angle, both a Renaissance painting and the people looking at it. Their expressions, like my mother's at the De Young, were impassive and inscrutable. Laughing, I squatted to explain the humor to my son, then looked up to see that, all around us, museum-goers had their own dour art looks, faraway and grim.

And oh, it's not Art I have come to distrust, but the way Art moves through the world.

In "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing," Linda Brodkey describes the modernist scene of writing as a *Male Author* writing *Literature* alone in his attic garret by the light of a thin gray candle (emphasis mine). There are many important things to be said about this scene, among them that it is so monumental that most of us are incapable of writing without it, and yet that it remains a scene upon which very few of us can easily project ourselves—we are the wrong race, class, gender; we do not subscribe to its romantic assumptions that equate creativity with genius, isolation, and deprivation. As a result, profound dissonance is embedded in our every writing moment, and part of learning to write is learning how to negotiate this paradox.

It is not just the iconography of the artist, but the obligation of being "creative," or of producing "Art," that gets in the way of many of us writing. Students will not find their blocks so much in *Moby-Dick* or van Gogh, as in their own private histories we can never know. Maybe the student's younger sibling was always "the creative one." Maybe a teacher consistently praised the student's best friend for her "artistic" talent. Or the student's writing was never chosen to be read aloud. And so on.

Often I ban the word "creative" in class, and though a few students typically protest, the rest are clearly gratified, for students know a principle of limitation and exclusion when they see it. To mark the manner by which identity is positively or negatively formed around prescribed ideas of creativity destabilizes prior hierarchies of "talent" that bear little relation to merit. Students still have their histories, of course, but the histories have a new twist.

For me it is significant that after my four years of silence, after I met those two boys-who-would-be-writers (both lawyers now), after I finally started writing again, I turned out not to be very good at it. That was at Stanford, where that year the workshop consisted of four M.A. candidates, four Stegner fellows, and one Texan of indeterminate status. Of the M.A. candidates, all were freshly minted twenty-one-year-old women, paying Stanford tuition for nine graduate classes (only three in the workshop), culminating in a master's in English. The Stegners—three men and one foreign-born woman—were all thirty-something published writers who were paid a healthy stipend to attend the workshop and advised to avoid taking other courses, which might detract from their creative "writing time." Perhaps to equalize the gender balance, a fourth man—the Texan—had been invited to join us that year. Unlike the Stegners, he received no writing stipend, but he did not pay tuition or take classes either.

In retrospect, our unhappiness as M.A. candidates seems completely gratuitous and forms the basis of what I have come to call "the crucible theory of creative writing pedagogy," a kind of "no pain, no gain" locker-room wisdom we would never knowingly have chosen. But we were so naive and thrilled to be at Stanford we could not have begun to conceive that a principal part of our function in the workshop was to provide a forum for the "real writers." As for us, modern-day "lady scribblers," when we presented writing for critique, a peculiar drowsiness pervaded the classroom, and the eyes of the (male) professor would invariably glaze over, turning literally murky with inattention. At the end of fall term one of us went to complain about her "B" and was reprimanded that the *best* writers in the class weren't even being graded.

If this sounds like sour grapes, it really isn't. My main lesson at Stanford—how to persevere—was invaluable. Without it, I might have quit long ago. What I have been trying to describe instead is an institutional setup for failure, paternalistically determined and replicated at creative writing centers everywhere. Whether a hierarchy is based on gender, race, class, or "creativity," it is still a hierarchy, within which who speaks and who doesn't—who has "talent" or who doesn't, whose work is recognized and whose isn't—is strictly circumscribed.

Before I went to Stanford, I read a twenty-five-year retrospective anthology of stories from the workshop, with an introduction by Wallace Stegner that described the careers of the represented writers. I was just twenty-one, more than half my life ago, and yet I still remember his characterization of the housewives as "perhaps the most fortunate of all," for they had all their time at home for writing. As the mother of two school-age children and a member of a generation squeezed by transitional gender roles, I continue to be astonished by what, in my more charitable moments, I view as generational myopia.

Three of the four fellows that year have maintained high literary profiles. I have since lost touch with the other M.A. candidates, but one published a book of stories and two of us went on to doctoral study. The fourth, I don't know. We corresponded for a few years, and then just nothing. And I wonder: Is the relative silence of the four young women who started out at Stanford so many years ago really because the Stegners were "better writers," or did something happen to us there to produce a kind of silencing, a folding-in upon ourselves, erasure.

Shh, Foucault asks: *What does it matter who is speaking?*

The answer, at least to a large number of creative writing institutions, is that it matters a lot. And if we truly value the right of each of us to speak, then one of the first things students need to know is how that privilege circulates in the world, how strictly it is regulated, how well guarded are its rules and its secret codes. Such information can enhance our skills at negotiating writing in its external aspects, even as it serves as a reminder to stay rooted in why we started writing in the first place, and why, most profoundly, it matters that we should continue.

In the title essay of *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo makes a distinction between a writer's "triggering" subject and her or his language. The first, he describes as the material and subject that matters so profoundly to the writer that it will almost always spark writing. The second is a private language, a highly personal feeling for words and sense of sound and rhythm, also unique to each writer. If, as Robert Frost has said, "A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung" (252), a writer's "private" language may be imagined as a writer's sentence sound, almost like notes, how they come together in the writer's ear, prior even to words.

"You may string words together without a sentence sound to string them on," Frost warns, "just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees, but—it is bad for the clothes" (252–253).

For Hugo, the process of learning how to write is a process of transferring allegiance from subject to language, which we must learn to play for all we are worth. Only the world is full of noise and so much interference we cannot hear ourselves when we begin. So we begin by listening, and listening, and again listening, as meaning (our subject) takes care of itself.

When I first started teaching, I believed this absolutely. I taught language as a medium, without a reference point, signs playing freely among signs, writing referring only to writing.

"If you want to communicate," I told them Richard Hugo said, "use the telephone" (5).

"Don't think," I told them François said. "Just write."

It is not that I no longer celebrate language, nor that I don't still use Hugo, who remains especially useful for the way he humanizes the discussion and describes language as a personal sense of sound and rhythm and not some complicated system or structure. I am aware of how romantic and obsolete this sounds, not postmodern at all, but I don't really care. Giving students back a sense of their own words is a good way to generate desire for more.

But I have also come around again to reconsidering the more primary notion of a triggering subject, for the whole idea of "writing" is so culturally received that students often have given very little thought to why they want to do it in the first place. And the extent to which they have failed to examine their own writing motives correlates exactly with the extent to which they remain alienated from writing, out of touch with its power and grace.

A long time ago, when we were young and learning to write backwards in school, each of us also learned to practice writing for its derivative effects—our teacher's praise, our mother's pride, the grades that got us free drinks at the Coke plant. It was such an easy slide into a familiar way of being, we did not recognize it as it happened, but the loss, for the most part, was grievous. This is not about product and process any more than it is, finally, about language and subject, for what is lost in writing backwards is a much more immediate sense of everything that comes together in the writing moment to produce both pleasure and meaning. Perhaps the first goal of teaching writing should be to retrain students in its praxis as a primary experience, a constellation of effects coming into being in a single writing moment, and then the next.

My first quarter at Stanford I was working on a novel with a high-gothic plot, local-color characters, and abundant incest in the mountains. Strangely blended, by and large from what I'd read, what I'd studied, what I'd seen, and what I'd totally "made up," it was my response to a creative writing professor who announced the first day to "write what we knew," as in what, he insisted, we had actually experienced. Since nothing of interest had ever happened to me, I determined to prove him wrong, and proved him right instead by writing a mess. Having failed at my first major writing project, I tried "experimental" fiction, which was gratifying because it challenged the prevailing mood of the workshop, and also because it provided a form that could contain, I believed, always more, into which it somehow seemed I could cram everything. It would be years before I could talk about master narratives and gender constructions, but what I started at Stanford—a writing *against* writing—was as important as it turned out to be prescient.

Looking back I am struck not by how much I might then have known, but by how quickly I forgot once I left that workshop, in the aftermath of which I gave up nontraditional form in a dogged attempt to master minimalism, then very high in regard. I worked hard and got good at nuance, understatement, and compression, but over time it just wore out on me and my writing changed back. Years later, riffling through a box of old papers, I came upon the single written comment I received at Stanford—indeed, on all my writing, all those years—which read, in part:

> It is sometimes alleged that experimental writers, in violating conventional modes of presentation, have given up the old essentials—human interest and understanding, vivacity, compassion, the *connaissance du coeur humain*, not to mention dramatic suspense. I find it hard to imagine a more understanding & more compassionate evocation of age, time, solitude, weariness than yours. I also believe your oblique approach, with its alienation-effects in which you constantly insist that this is something being "composed," creates an aesthetic distance that intensifies the humanity. We are ~~asked~~ made to give up our conventional ways of approaching age,

> solitude, time, pity & egoism, etc., and to feel this more or less universal experience freshly. (Albert Guerard)

I was, frankly, shocked, for this described, in many ways, where my writing had finally ended up (especially in terms of its insistence on "being composed"), though there were six or seven years when I had completely lost touch of what my writing was, and this should make us pause as teachers. Guerard did his best to help me understand my own narrative impulses, but in the absence of a critical environment that raised, as a matter of general inquiry, the very questions that might have illuminated writing for me, I had no coherent way of understanding my own early instinct and flailing. This was still the seventies, and so we didn't talk about narrative convention, structure, form, or composition. We didn't even talk much about literary models. I didn't even know what he meant by "violating conventional modes of presentation," never mind the "aesthetic distance" derived from the insistence that what I was writing was being "composed." We were more in the school of the "old essentials," for what we talked about was character, motivation, credibility, and authenticity. It is not that theory was not present in our discussion, but it was so deeply embedded that we could not begin to articulate it.

Thus, despite Guerard's attempt to give my writing critical attention (and with it, the insight and perspective from which I might have learned to extend it), it was easy to go back to the kind of writing that had won the approval of the workshop, which, after I left, I no longer found stifling. Paradoxically, what I'd learned at Stanford—some model of the way I thought I was supposed to write and the vaguely internalized sense of "good writing" I had picked up there—stood in the way of my own development as a writer for years.

In those days I held close to the value of rejection, which I learned to call the "underdog theory of writing" and which I went on to embrace as a teacher. In time, however, I began to wonder why things had to be so difficult, especially in the face of such institutional implacability that chance seemed to play as great a role in writing success as anything else. Because not giving up is only a small part of the story. The rest is determined by forces far beyond our control. Students, like us, want to believe in the literary world as a meritocracy, but most know that between the best seller, movie deal, Pulitzer, or fame, and them, a great mercurial chasm exists.

So it is not the principle but the exclusivity of art I am against. Writing is an act of faith, like any other, and if we truly care about our "triggering subjects," we must put them aside to concentrate instead on working language. Only in this way will the subject itself survive the tremendous assault of our own most earnest intentions. The same logic applies to the pursuit of art, or publication, or any other derivative effect of writing. As soon as we deflect our attention from our words, they go dead on the page and writing stops.

Excellence in writing, as in many things, will flourish in a climate that is open to it, wherever and however it may express itself, though we never can predict it, nor know ahead of time what it will look like. Any creative writing curriculum should examine the professional and institutional concerns of the discipline—publishing and so on. And in order to do so, we need to be able to describe in critical terms what "successful" writing looks like. But these concerns are most properly addressed after, not before the writing. In the beginning, the writing is the thing, and invariably we must begin by beginning again.

I lied about not knowing where it started, my tremendous desire to write, which people would remark on through the years—not my talent or my power or distinction on the page, but how much I wanted it, my unseemly passion for writing. While it's true I don't remember first learning to make words, I do remember the day I decided I would become a writer.

I was nine years old, and it, the start of writing in my life, began with Jan McQuade, who for three memorable months that autumn would become my closest and only childhood friend, my first love. Though more than a quarter century has passed since then, I still remember as clearly as if Jan were standing before me now how she looked the first time I saw her—that was in October—and the last, just a few months later.

The first: she is standing in the windswept hallway outside my fourth-grade classroom in an oversized red plaid wool coat and clutching a woman's black handbag that goes almost all the way down to the ground. Two red braids drape down her chest to her waist and her pale skin is smattered with light umber freckles.

The last: stricken, her freckles like dark inkblots, her face slowly turning red from the nape of her neck as her eyes fill with tears and my mother yanks me away.

But for those three months we might as well have been one person, with a single heart between us, twinned and entwined. I had long suspected this was the way of other girls, and now, incredibly, it had become mine. I remember the feel of her hand as I held it—exactly the same size as mine and often chapped, with cracked red lines etching an intricate map in her skin. I would pretend to read it as I splatted lotion from my fat glass bottle into the cup of her palms. I'd rub it in gently and say this line meant we'd be roommates in college, this, we'd be each other's bridesmaids, and this, she'd have a long life and great love.

At our school, down a grassy incline from the blacktop where most children played, there was a red dirt yard, ringed by Digger pine and manzanita and a haphazard boundary of boulders beyond which California foothills rolled and arched their round way up toward the mountains. Before I knew Jan, I'd spend my recesses wandering the periphery of that schoolyard, or perched on a boulder, staring out at the sky and the mountains, the hawks that sometimes looped low above, my back to the playground shrieks of the other children. Though I was throughout my childhood an often unhappy loner, for those three months with Jan, arms linked, in step, we wandered the dirt yard together and I was no longer alone.

Even after all this time, it is still painful to recall the intensity of that friendship, like nothing I had known before, or, if I am honest, since. Jan set something loose in me and, despite my shy silence around anyone else, with her I became expansive and voluble, all chattering words, noisy and excited and full of ideas. We would imagine shapes in the clouds and I would name them out loud—*tree, rabbit, ballerina, your face.* I'd make up stories about when the Indians lived there, using as tools the very rocks we now held in our hands. We'd whisper secrets to each other, and I remember the sweet taste of her ear lobe, its downiness and sheer human smell.

What did I know about class difference then? I thought all other families were like us, living in one house and never changing except through birth or death or your grandmother coming to live with you. It was 1961. Everything was full of promise, if you didn't count the bomb. I had no idea that some people might suffer from joblessness, or hunger, or abuse, families without roots that kept moving on. Now, in retrospect, two things stand out: that I never went to Jan's house—not to play, or pick her up, or drop her off—and that when she joined my Girl Scout troop, my mother, our troop leader, gave her my old uniforms, though they had been shortened to fit me and were limp and shiny with wear.

Did I give her other clothes as well—socks, too-small sweaters, play pants with patches in the knees? And what did I think when she would sleep over and eat everything served her without complaining?

What did I love about Jan McQuade? The first time I saw her, her hair, that deep auburn color of polished hazelnuts, shiny and neatly braided—it was always braided, still a wonder to me as I myself have never mastered braids. I loved her woman's handbag, a dime, she told me, at

Goodwill, from which she would pull such amazing things as a used red lipstick, or a chiseled obsidian arrowhead she'd found on the playground, or a comb with rhinestones, and only three were missing. *Her voice.* I loved her shyness, mirroring mine, so that I could be as passionate and eloquent with her as I had ever dreamed. I loved the feel of loosened words in my mouth, clicking and clacking like something round and smooth, river stones, maybe, still glistening. I loved how she listened, as if attuned.

In class, she rarely spoke, never above a whisper, and her fingers, as if separate from her real self, played constantly with the corners of her sweaters, her buttons, the feathery tips of her braids. Jan, like me, could not bear to be looked at, and wouldn't *look* either at someone else. Always, her shy eyes darted away—downward, sideways, over my shoulder, just to the left of my foot. There were times her whole body trembled, and I remember that when the teacher called on her, tears would well up in her eyes and she would bite her lower lip until all the blood went out of it, but she would neither answer nor give in and cry.

I can tell you that I loved her, and it would be true, but I can't tell you a single thing about her real life, or what we talked about for endless hours, though I remember our conversations as both engrossing and thrilling. I look at my own children now—Sam, guarded, even taciturn, completely considered in his speech; Joey, an insatiable talker—and I think if Sam could have the instincts of his brother, even for a moment, what a tremendous release it would be, that overwhelming rush of unmediated language, *whoosh,* with the force of a wave. I know I must have prattled to Jan, who was always the last thing I'd think about before going to sleep, the first when I woke up. I grew dizzy from the things I planned to tell her.

Listen: it is like some faraway babble, sweet and pure. *Jan, Jan, Jan.* Just the plain sound of her name in my mouth, in my throat, was pleasurable and reassuring, as if it confirmed some deep knowledge I could never pronounce. Even now I don't know how else to say it, but when Jan and I would wander alone on the playground, surrounded by red dirt and lured in our imaginations by the dense chaparral beyond, the arc of the hills, the distant ridge of mountains against the bluest sky, I would be, I swear, though only nine years old, in full possession of language, and what I had no way of knowing then was that it would not last and that, in the long silence that was coming, grief would numb my ability to speak and a stubborn fist of muteness would lodge itself for years in my throat.

The last time I saw Jan McQuade was at a Girl Scout meeting one clear Friday winter afternoon. We were dancing—the Virginia Reel, I think. There was this point in the dance when, one by one, each pair of partners skipped to the center of parallel lines, hooked arms, and twirled. Jan was my partner—our single heart—but Jan didn't know this dance the way I did, hadn't practiced it year after year, learned its movements with her body, like an instinct. I don't know what I thought. I suppose I thought she should know exactly what I knew, feel what I felt, mirror me in every respect, my other half. I felt that close to Jan but it's taken half a lifetime to realize I don't have any idea what she felt about me.

There are moments in all of our lives that inscribe themselves as memory, permanent and haunting. Don't ask me why this is but in each of them we turn a little more into ourselves, however desperately we may regret this entrenchment. I have organized my memory of childhood around the love I say I felt for Jan, but when the music started and our turn came, I don't know, I remember being in a high state of excitement, charged with some unfamiliar energy, and so blissfully happy that when at the beat of the musical cue I skipped to the center and Jan wasn't there, was still standing uncertainly at the head of the other line, one foot tentatively wrapped around the other calf, somehow, for some reason, I panicked and betrayed her. There isn't any point to saying why, now, some thirty years later. Everyone was looking at me and I couldn't stop myself. I threw a tantrum. I screamed and said unbearable things. I called Jan names—*idiot, stupid.* I cried and stamped my foot until my mother grabbed my shoulder and yanked me away, and as she did I remember looking—really *looking*—for the first time at Jan, who stood accused and pale, her freckles, suddenly dark, staining her face as a rush of blood rose up from her neck.

I was nine years old, the same age Joey is now, and not that day, not even over the weekend, but over the course of the following week, as I waited for Jan where the buses unloaded at school, my apology becoming more elaborate and, in my mind, convincing, a passionate soul-wrenching plea for forgiveness, slowly I formulated my idea to be a writer. Because after that bleak afternoon when I betrayed my best girlhood friend to the whiny phonograph strains of the Virginia Reel, Jan never came back to my school, and, with the exception of the returned Scout uniforms her father dropped off later that week when no one was home, I never heard from her again. The idea that formed itself in the ensuing months, growing stronger and more absolute throughout the lonely years that would follow, was that I would write and publish what had happened. Certainly, there was something, at the start, of penance in my plan—I would tell the truth, I would say I was sorry, and I would be forgiven—but as the years went by I began to see writing as a way to reclaim what I'd lost when Jan left, my unfettered access to language, and through it, to my own self, a certain part of who I am I cannot get to any other way.

Graduate training in creative writing drilled that out of me, but watching my students over this last complex decade I've come, not without reluctance, to believe again that teaching writing is something more than teaching students where writers get ideas or how to rotate the paradigmatic/syntagmatic axes of a narrative. It took a long time, really, long past my vicarious gratification at my students' acceptance at important writing programs, or their first publications, their prizes and ambitions, but at a certain point I began to think of teaching in much more basic terms and to reformulate what I wanted for my students, something so simple as that writing should not end for them, but should continue as a kind of matrix in their lives, a space, perhaps, where noise and silence no longer compete but complement and illuminate one another.

However romantic it may be to say so, I think most of us are drawn to writing in the first place (and stay there) for reasons at least partly related to what we can discover, through writing, about the way we use narrative and language to shape and give meaning to experience. Derrida never said there wasn't a center, he said the center was a function, and for writers one functional center is writing itself. This is why if we teach to the other side of writing—final product, literary text, publication—without first positively acknowledging its personal aspect, we betray our students. Writing is an act of faith, yes, but it is just as much a way of life that provides an organizing structure for the way we are in this world.

Finally, none of this really answers why any writer keeps on writing. I suspect it is again a simple thing, for I have grown to like, and also to depend on, that self of mine who is constructed in the act of writing, the primary experience of who I am when I am doing it. I believe this is connected to whatever I still have to say to Jan McQuade. I think this might be useful information for our students, though saying so to them is never easy. Saying so to them means giving up a bit of our authority and privilege and acknowledging that writing's only writing, after all—it means sharing our maps, our secrets, our codes.

But surely there's a moment in any writer's life when everything clears out at once, and he or she begins again, returns to whatever it was that started her or him out in the first place, only now a bit better equipped by all that is of value that has surfaced in between. Maybe being a writer is nothing more than an accumulated lifetime of such moments. And maybe being a teacher is not much more than showing students how to recognize those moments in their own lives. I'm not sure I really know, but what I do know is, in writing, as no doubt in teaching, what we know and what we want may well hold together for no better reason than our desire that they should. And I also know that, when we let our students know this, it is at least a start for writing that will never end.

5 What Are We to Do with All These Rocks?

In this essay I trace the development of a creative writing class based on feminist theory and women's literature, a course conceived as one in which an investigation of female difference might encourage new writing. If we are trained to write the way we think we are supposed to write, what might happen in the absence of prescription? If our models are patriarchal in both substance and form, what might happen in the presence of other models—theoretical and literary—out of which something like a female aesthetic might emerge? This class is designed to have students explore the full range of their voices—what they know already and what they may have yet to imagine. I have been told it is like gardening, with students growing inward and outward simultaneously. But it is not an easy process, and this essay also explores why.

The voices collected here are those of the students themselves. The boxed texts are from Sarah Loffler's final project, a story about a woman on a train and her mother, a story constructed as a virtual hypertext, with reflections on the class running down the left-hand side. Sarah stitched her text together with bright silk embroidery thread, running the thread from each numbered box to a site in the story where interconnections occurred. It was a lovely piece of handwork.

> This is the central struggle of the woman writer. For every work, each cadence, each posture, the tone, the range of voices, the nature of plot, the rhythm of structures, the things that happen, events excluded, the reasons for writing, the ways she's impeded, the noises around her, vocabularies of feeling, scripts of behavior, choices of wisdom, voices inside her, body divided, image of wonder.
>
> All must be re-made. (DuPlessis 24–25)

1. This is a story of a class.

Day 1: The moment the professor opened her mouth to speak I knew I was lost.
—Wendy Elam

2. The atmosphere was one that I struggled with.

Thus I arrive, as a student once described her own experience to me, naive and hopeful on the first day of class, intent on beginning, yet again, again. This class, Women and Writing—a senior-level creative writing class based on both feminist theory and women's literature—is small, maybe fourteen students, and I am surprised it has not been canceled. We eye each other warily, the students and I. As in all beginnings, we are not sure what to expect.

My petulant child has been whining. . . . I don't understand any of it. Not a bit. I don't want to do this. This is not fair. I don't know what any of this is about. I just don't understand.
—Marion Heyn

3. I became conscious of those around me.

In other words:
(Lately) I'm standing on the edge of a cliff trying to jump off.—Ilene Miele

4. I found that I was not alone.

i was always so afraid of disappearing. i was always so afraid to take up space. i never knew, i hardly thought, my desperate fear. the danger was not in difference. it was not in difference. it was not the other that could harm me. it was the stutter of my thoughts. and my participation, all my cooperation. a complicity in living patriarchal thought.—Julie Coren

5. I consciously fought the efforts to resist.

Eskimos have three hundred different names for varieties of snow. Unname them, fine, unname everything, seems like a lot of work, are we unhappy with deer, doe, fox, lion and cracker, now there is a word. Don't touch the cracker.—Ken Siewert

The course itself has a complicated status and history as an "experimental topic." Courses in this category may be taught four times, after which they must be reviewed again under the more rigorous and unforgiving regular curriculum cycle. In the absence of this latter step, experimental topic courses simply disappear, as if they never really happened—*poof, is 496WW gone yet, did women never write like that?* Now, in these budget-tightening days, rumors circulate that to get a "new" course approved, an old one must be deleted. Women and Writing has been hugely successful, but though the department has been unable to "make" a Chaucer class for years, I do not think it likely, nor wise, that we'd ever exchange Chaucer for women writers writing.

As I rewrite this months later, I remember that both Gay Male Voices and Lesbian Writers (other experimental topic classes) had also been at risk, and that as I tried to imagine the future of our department in their absence, I had worried about the consequences of substitution and replacement: *Why must it always be an either/or proposition?* And then I think about the students, whose lives found full expression in "women writing" classes and, caught in the terrible synapse between one and the other, I know that change is never an easy dialectic. In the end, both gay literature classes (emphasis on *literature*) were approved, and I chose not to send my own class forward, but, instead, to integrate its principles into the daily practice of my teaching.

It had been two years since the last time I taught Women and Writing, eight since I conceived it, in 1986, as a proposal for an educational equity funding source that no longer exists. During the time I've spent at Northridge, my thinking on gender, and writing, and teaching has continued to evolve, but back then I was fresh out of graduate school and full of my own naïveté and righteousness. I was, in addition, inexperienced and extremely tentative about how I fit into the way I still believed

What are you writing there scribbling with your blue pen fury anger fear what is it there can I read it what are you writing there furiously—

It isn't important.
It's not important at all.
—Beth Wiggins

6. I realized how fragile we all seemed.

1. If you find your mother is bewitched, go to the shore where the good witch lives and ask, Do you know my mother? If the answer is no, turn back, do not go to the Bad Witch Lake, your mother's Bad Witch Lake, for you will surely drown there. If they hold her hostage, they are waiting for you, her daughter. Not even when you have grown old and wise should you go, especially not then. Do you know what will happen? Just as men have Sirens who call them, women have bodies of water, their mother's bad witchy lakes that call and lure, beckon and croon, rock and sway, like beautiful cats standing and waving to you from the other shore. Who wouldn't want to go?—Nancy Krusoe

7. I became aware that I would have to search for new ways to write.

things were supposed to be and the way, more ideally, I imagined them to be.

Thus Eloise, would become, in my eyes, a champion of almost everything, for Eloise was Eloise, a middle-aged lesbian whose dignity and grace and enormous sense of personal presence (and pure white hair) reminded me, in some oblique way, of my own grandmother (whose hair was also white, though never buzzed or spiked), dead now for twenty years but a woman, nonetheless, who had left Baltimore a century ago for California, with this advice from her father: to study medicine, to get herself a profession, not ever to depend on any man to support her. My grandmother had moved through her life with that kind of authority, and now, what I saw in Eloise that I admired and was still struggling with myself, was the plain and unambivalent ability to speak.

I want to begin here with Eloise not just because we wrote the course together in the old days, but also because what we sought to define was a radical pedagogy of inclusion. This is at least in part, though surely not exclusively, a feminist principle, and so it seems significant to me that this course was conceived in collaboration, and that it was, at least initially, co-taught. It is also important, because if at least one spirit of feminism is unhierarchical and cooperative, Eloise and I, as a team, reflected both that spirit and the forces that work relentlessly against it. I was a first-year novice teacher, and Eloise, an experienced pro, had taught at Northridge for many years by then, but I was tenure-track and she was not—has since, in fact, gone on to better things, and I miss her. Now as I begin again the course, probably for its last time, she is with me, and I know I could not do this without her.

English 496WW: Women and Writing began at a faculty retreat in Santa Barbara almost a decade ago now. The California State University system was still flush with loose eighties moneys, enough to send the faculty to Santa Barbara for retreat, enough to support innovative programs designed to implement curricular diversity. In our current budgetary crisis, with Affirmative Action made suddenly illegal, I look back at the day I met Eloise and marvel how at the time so many things seemed not only necessary, but also possible. And Santa Barbara, at the height of the drought, was windswept and drenched with the piercing light of a late October sun.

What Eloise and I had in common was a private history of writing educations in which we felt both alienated and subdued—often to silence—until we learned, with intoxicating suddenness, to reexperience our writing lives through the transforming lens of feminism. Our conversation framed a catalyst for change in the shared belief that students are entitled to see their own experience reflected and examined in their undergraduate curriculum.

But students are unlikely to expect this and, among our increasingly diverse undergraduate populations, are even less at home in academic settings than I once was myself. I know this. And I also know that, officially, my job is to introduce these students to the principles of this discourse, to ferret out the ones who are especially good at it, to nurture them and encourage, promote them. I am, after all, a Ph.D. creative writer, fully trained in patriarchal modes of being. If I never quite fit into them myself, that is more about me than my training. And though we know from our own workshop clichés that you have to "know the rules to break them," we also know from experience (and Foucault) that we become what we pretend to be. I was certified and safe enough to understand that my job was to make safe students (obedient, disciplined, behaved), but I also knew that doing so would continue to confine them to their silences, and, while this would work for me for a time, meeting Eloise would also give me the

I am the thirst. . . . The thirst
which overpowers you—
making you weak and
fearful. I am with you
always—constantly in need
of attention. My only desire
is to be quenched.
—Poppy, Wendy, j. julie

8. Each night I would try to find the place that I belonged.

When I was a child, 7 or 8, my mother told me not to read much because it would ruin my health since I was a girl.—Nancy Krusoe

9. We would read what we had written out loud.

She sometimes forgets she is a woman . . .
—Felicia Kreitl

10. Sometimes the things that were exposed were very personal.

Mothers are space . . .
Head goes back goes
forward arms move around
like isadora braiding my
hair then brushing it out
putting little shells inside my
braids. I wanna be nicolette
larson and nadia kominche
and sing like joan and
marry leaf garret...but mija
you're the daughter of a
woman who dances on red
tables on top of men's knees
like Isadora and mother
pulls her head back in the
space . . .
In the space.
—Poppy Tankenson

11. I found that I could not grasp some of the other students' writing.

But I am floating free now and I must remember that I cannot stay here in the mauve. In the white sand I can build an angel for the ghost to hump and keep busy. And I can sacrifice pages. But the blank ones are necessary.—j. julie

12. I became annoyed with the self indulgent sound of others' pain.

I have a story to tell you.
—Nancy Krusoe

Instead she thinks she is alone. No one tells her the statistics. The numbers are in the rule book and the rule book is off limits for her.
—Mona Houghton

13. I heard my mother's voice go around in my head.

i think my struggle's always been the know how, the some how, the any how of being enough, of wanting enough, of caring enough. the willingness enough to claim myself—to claim my

courage to envision a vastly different kind of teaching, one that would proceed from a basic suspension of the rules as we have known them, on the principle that learning them to break them simply reinscribes them at the center, only in reverse.

If this suggests, as some might argue, that we have no decent sense of history—i.e., regard for western culture as it has come to us through institutions designed and dedicated to preserve it—we believe, instead, that a different historical stance is achieved through an archaeological consciousness that seeks to uncover what has been buried. Admitting these lost voices into our academic or "creative" conversations need not be experienced as a dissolution of our heritage, but rather as enrichment. A classic response to this dilemma was expressed by an early professor of mine, who met my proposal to study short fiction by American women with outrage.

"Does this mean you don't plan to read Faulkner?" he said. "How about Hemingway, Fitzgerald? How can you study American fiction without them?"

It is not that a both/and vision constitutes an illogic. It is just a different form of logic than we have known before (though haven't we who are women always known it?). Though that early professor reduced me to tears, what I would have said to him if I'd known how to say it then is that it is possible, even illuminating, to read Hemingway alongside, for example, Jane Bowles, that the two voices together reveal a different view of mid-twentieth century American culture than we have been accustomed to receive, a richer one, more complex, more enigmatic, and more interesting, however perplexing. Besides, I might have said, we already know our Hemingway. How does learning how to read our Jane Bowles, as well, affect and transform these prior reading strategies?

I might have said that had I felt at all entitled to the discourse in which I might have framed such

words. i have such need,
selene. i have such need.
—Julie Coren

14. I let my writing reflect my guilt.

She has no ancestors. When she was young she would look at her mother leaning over the stove and wonder about when her feet were little and dirty and skipped alongside some California road, wandering with *her* mother. Homeless, fatherless, nationless both, from field to field her mother and grandmother picked with the Mexicans; tomatoes; plums, walnuts—her mother's young hands picked and stretched like those of her grandmother. When the sun set on her mother's only dress, it was covered with the sticky stains of a fugitive's labor. This had nothing to do with the Brady Bunch. She did not know what it had to do with.—Felicia Kreitl

15. I tried to hold onto my control but felt that the language I used was slippery and dangerous.

Day 2. It is a bit overwhelming at first.—Wendy Elam

observations, but this was 1981 and I was still fighting back tears.

Does it matter either that this same professor had been assigned as my advisor when I entered graduate school? Does it matter that he had a certain reputation among female graduate students? Does it matter that while he was haranguing me for leaving out the male masters he had somehow positioned his chair in front of his closed office door, while I found myself lodged in the corner student chair? And finally, does it matter that it's taken me fifteen years to frame these questions, to count them as important—even valid?

In some ways, meeting Eloise was a first important step not just toward my coming to acknowledge these questions as both valid and my own, but also toward accepting my responsibility for what I was still learning about the power of the center, and my own writing self, and different modes of silence, and ways to circumvent them. Designing and teaching the class together was a vital training ground for me in my education as woman/writer/teacher. For as we came to attempt to articulate in the context of our classroom what was different for us in our development as writers, I came to see not only how profoundly we'd been locked outside the very discourse we were supposed to master, but also how clearly our experience in this was reflected by the experience of our students.

As Mona Houghton wrote in that first class:

> And you know, eventually [the girl] finds out it is okay. She finds so much out, so suddenly. Today she feels a bit ashamed for being so dimwitted. She always sensed something was amiss. She had on a shoe that was meant for a smaller foot. She sensed exclusion. She experienced it. She fought it. But she never got very far. Today it feels good to know that "patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and through silence. Facts we

people
homeless
workers
students
writers
"As long as women are
Blacks
Hispanics
Asians
foreigners
people
isolated from one another,
not allowed to offer other
people
homeless
workers
students
writers
women
Blacks
Hispanics
Asians
foreigners
people
the most personal accounts
of their lives, they will not
be part of any narrative of
their own."
—Carolyn Heilbrun (46)/
Marion Heyn

Talk to me you say, and I am so afraid that I will lose, forget these feelings from deep inside. So afraid I will lie them away, deny my body through language. So afraid of language.
—Kim Guthrie

16. I was frustrated.

Lives not complete—writing suppressed—silence and subterfuge—flutes and fugues, lettuce and lab rats, pens and green pencils—the silence presses out from all of them—silence like compost, lightening, loosening, adding the spark

needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us," (Rich 4). She understands now that patriarchal refers to more than the family unit. She is outside the patriarchy. She is glad to be outside its confine.

She is learning that instead of always running towards that which eludes her, what has always excluded her, she should instead find out what is in front of her.

It is that time. For what she regrets most, in all this, is the time wasted, real time—days, weeks, years—the time wasted in re-action.

Now, finally, as I begin again in a dank foul-smelling trailer, blinded by a back wall of smog-smudged southern California windows so blasted with light that I cannot see the faces before me, I hear myself speaking with a certain urgency of what I know of difference as it might be expressed in gender or other muted groups, and it all spills out in complicated branches, and as it does we lose ourselves together in a convoluted language we hang on to by the seat of our pants.

Cautious, as always, about delicate distinctions surrounding the nature and distributions of power, we define gender as both a cultural construct that takes place along a whole continuum from power and mastery to the intoxicating borders of everything we know (how else to account for the likes of Margaret Thatcher, never mind the most empathic, porous boy you ever met or could imagine?) and as a metaphor for other kinds of marginalization, and as we do I am reminded, in what Virginia Woolf calls a "splitting off of consciousness" (101), of a family reunion at my aunt's houses on the most serene curve of the Monterey Bay to the lee side of humped eucalyptus-covered hills I have written of so often. That whole side of the family—my mother's sister's side—has shifted just a little bit away from me, ever suspicious of what I might write next. How do I know this? I don't really know this,

of life to dead-seeming soil:
we all grew and wrote and
write and are silent still.
—Marion Heyn

17. I became disillusioned with the class. I was trying to save myself.

1. fugitive: running or trying to run away or escape from the law. To break the ties that bind.—Julie Coren

Language came later. The joy of playing with words, tumbling them onto the page until they formed a pleasing pattern came in adulthood. First I had to go through a period of "not writing."—Mary Marca

18. Suddenly I figured out what we were struggling against.

Day 3: (notes in a mirror: Look closely: . . . we are silenced long before we can learn to say NO.)
—Wendy Elam

19. I became excited and found it hard to keep my mouth shut.

Everything I can tell you isn't enough.—Ann Holley

At first they blamed the pigments. The trueness of color. Then they blamed the cloth for its inability to hold the colors. In the end, they blamed their hands, clumsy and calloused. Their hearts see this vision and they would forever try and capture, on this scrap of cloth, the desert sun in its rich yellow moment.
—Ken Siewert

might have made it up as well, imagining distance in glances just preoccupied with other lives, but now at the reunion, self-conscious and aware of what feels like their scrutiny, I am suddenly, loudly making some ironic, slightly tipsy comment about how my husband takes care of the technology end of the family—buying TVs, setting up computers, and so forth—because, after all, "that's what guys do," when my lesbian Pacific Gas and Electric worker cousin erupts in pure fury at what she calls my "narrow-minded sexism." *Who, me?* I think, aggrieved, as I consider, maybe for the first time, that I am locked outside the circle of affection of this family by my use of language as much as by anything else, and, embarrassed, I try to convince them I was only joking, then add, by way of explication, that in my classes we define gender as a "cultural construct." And this is what everyone finds very funny. They laugh, and they laugh, and they laugh.

In my class, when I say the words "cultural construct," all this and more occurs to me—the fog, as it drifts down over the hills, my grandmother, and the acute uneasiness I continue to feel at not really knowing why they find me so ridiculous—and so, before I know it, I am also telling my students about my family that lives in two houses by the sea, and doing so, I must also tell them not only why it seems important that some of my family once laughed at the concept I am now teaching them, but also how it is that I allow myself to do so, not to teach in the straight line, but to follow, as we will learn to call them, the sparks.

Some years ago in graduate school I became intrigued by the concept of the "female sentence," which I first encountered while reading Virginia Woolf and which has sustained some high degree of notoriety since she first described it. For myself, it was a concept I embraced with enthusiasm, convinced I'd finally found the key to some important secret of the way things are.

20. I had been holding animosity toward the instructor for not taking control of the class.

9. I have a story to tell you. A woman loves her daughter. Her daughter buys a cat and when that cat is dying the mother calls the daughter and says, Come quick, he's dying. The daughter comes, and quick as a light turned on she blows into his mouth and he lives. Again on the way to the city he dies and again she blows into his mouth and he breathes. The three of them go on, they speed, they drive like devils rushing at dawn, and at last they arrive at the clinic where the doctor says, certainly not, no. I can not save this cat. There is no hope.
—Nancy Krusoe

21. I was embarrassed for not having figured it out sooner.

And so, by the time she is six the girl child is disenfranchised. She is denied a language that acknowledges her, she is a member of a culture that plays down her importance, and her sensuality/sexuality is no longer traveling along its own path, but rather down some overgrown trail.
—Mona Houghton

22. The instructor was providing a zone without barriers in which we could be free.

i am a woman now
i am this woman, sigh.
—Julie Coren

As it turned out, and as I began to talk freely about it, this notion of a gendered sentence met with skepticism, from the most traditional to the most radical thinkers I knew. People kept challenging me to define it, and I kept failing even to come close. This wasn't anything I could put my finger on, just an idea I responded to intuitively, as if I'd chanced upon a long lost truth I'd always sensed existed but never even dreamed how to express. For the most part, people found this laughable. Even François used to tease me about it. He'd say that I said Woolf and Jane Bowles both write a "female sentence."

"But they don't write at all alike," he'd say.

And of course he was right, but what could I say? At the time, it would still be several years before I'd learn from Julia Kristeva that, "a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it'" (137). It would be several years more before I would come to understand what this really means in terms of defining such a practice in absolute relation to all dominant discourses of mastery, power, and privilege.

What I mean is, still craving some kind of certainty, at first I tried to fill the empty space, to say what something isn't really is. But between the poetry of Woolf and the missing syntactical synapses of Bowles, I was having trouble making any kind of sense. Like Mary Jacobus, I kept finding myself "struggling for self-definition in other terms, elsewhere, elsehow" (38), and it wasn't easy, finally, to give up the struggle, to say, with some kind of certitude, that if it's not familiar, if it doesn't sound quite right, if it subverts, resists, refuses what we already know, then, yes, maybe that's a mark of the marginal, in this case of gender but there are other margins.

The true thing is, as soon as you define it absolutely you're in trouble, because to fix it in any way as stable is to move outside the very play of language that defines it. You can use adjectives like

So how is it possible to create a space in which writing can take place? First, as I've heard and now understand, a person can only speak if there is a context in which the person feels privileged to speak. I think that privilege can be claimed. That is how I can create.my space, by claiming it. I am valid: I can speak. Why is it so difficult to be heard?—Beth Wiggins

Language is an attempt to express the psychic manifestations of our instincts. Our desires and whatever it is that compels us to express and create and live. Language is shaped both by culture, the heavy weight of linguistic precedent and society's value system, and the individual's real time use of it in those moments of freedom from self censorship and prohibition. There is something equally daunting and provocative about a blank page.
—Rhonda Hakimovich

23. I found it quite uncomfortable at first.

And I find it difficult to write from only one perspective while ignoring the others—they are all as much a part of me. Everything is so connected that I can begin one place and end up on something seemingly unrelated to where I began, and yet I got there somehow. I have never felt very comfortable with language. Recently I have attributed

multiple, shifting, porous, and *fluid. Polyphonic.* You can say it's related to cycles and circles, and then, as you attempt to close the current circuit, you can smile wryly and start talking about contiguity. *Circular. Contiguous. Nonlinear. Bracketed. Branching, looping. Overloaded. Double-voiced, muted.*

"Groping," François said in the end.

"What?" I said.

"You know," he said, "a thing that starts out not really knowing, tries some possibilities, circles back and tries over, loops, equivocates, contradicts—discovers itself in and through the very process of its making."

Circles back, equivocates, contradicts.

In and through the very process of its making.

"Yes," he agreed with me at last, "the female sentence exists, and I want to write them. How do I start?"

And what I never said to him, because I could not say it yet, is this: *Begin by rejecting everything you already know. Or, if you are a woman, begin with what you always knew but never knew you knew.* Or finally this: As long as we do define gender as position along a broad continuum of sexual difference, the farther out you move from established points along the line, the more you risk in terms of credibility or ease with which your writing may move through the world.

It is still the first day and I'm still talking branches in a sour trailer washed by dirty light. I do not know these students, and though I know resistance in the end will be our ally, I recognize with some uneasiness their almost palpable longing for a straight line, for any sentence they can grab at the front and ride all the way to its end without slipping. Is it uneasiness? It is another kind of recognition, something like memory, by which I know that the inherent logic of this longing is at least part of what silenced me for so long, the vexed omnipresence of the capital and period, the pervasive suspicion of the embedded clause. But if masculine logic depends on this to being a woman and a student, both of which are alienated from language and writing.—Kim Guthrie

I've spent my life trying to communicate with men. To be seen, to be heard. To be understood. Trying to speak from their perspective, with their words, their liniarness. To satisfy their empirical needs. Their need of brevity. Their need of authority. That which gets them past their fear of being consumed. To make myself tolerable.
What's your point?/
Do I need one?
Get to the bottom line./
Please wait
Where are you going with this?/
To you.
On what do you base your opinion?/
I feel.
Not now./ O.K.
Slow down./ O.K.
Not so loud./ O.K.
Call me later, I'm busy./
o.k.
No, really, I'm interested./
Fuck You!
—Sue Few

24. I had edged my way to a place where I would not feel guilty about writing in the way I wanted to.

Day 4: It is about more than writing. I notice the changing I am going through as I pass through this door.—Wendy Elam

As we begin to listen to and use the spectrum of voices within us, how do we sort them out?—Kim Guthrie

a rational, linear arc, might not one form of feminist discourse be described as contiguous, following branches?

Again, I think of Woolf, who writes, "If one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical" (101).

Outside. Alien and critical.

And so I tell them this. I tell them, too, how François used to tell me to see writing as a form of conversation, with every text you write joining in the rest of it, seeking out its place there, a new voice in the complex web of discourse. Only here, in a class on women and their writing, we may start out by imagining that in this whole conversation there may be no easy place for women and their speaking/writing, especially if their speaking/writing sounds like the way I'm talking now. For the most part, as the teacher, I will model how the conversation might somehow be transformed, so I begin, yet again, in terms that students may find baffling.

Hence, the elaborate branches I follow, from my aunt's windswept houses to Woolf and then Kristeva in what seems like a single breath. I am smiling, but it's not really funny. I used to say *circles.* I used to promise to complete, by the end of any class, the sentence I began at its beginning, but when this turned out not to be true, I was advised instead to promise that I'd finish every sentence sometime, just not to say when that might be. The man who gave me this advice is a man who loves his sentences, and he was willing to give me a great deal of leeway, but I could tell it bothered him when my sentences did not close at all, when they just split off, becoming something else. This has nothing to do with knowing where you're going in language, but instead proceeds from Woolf's concept of splitting and takes literally the famous Forsterian principle: *How can I know what I mean until I see what I've said?* Follow your

25. It seemed as though I had left behind my anger.

I will bring you peaches just
before they fall off the tree.
Perhaps I will put them in a
basket. You liked baskets,
Mother. Remember. In a
park with a picnic basket
a white button in the junk
drawer with a needle and
thread always. Cookies are
too sweet but a basket of
ripened ovaries is good in
the park after swinging
under a big oak tree.

—j. julie

26. Everything began to fall into place.

la, la, la, la, la, la, la.
language lives like rhythm
bending. like movement
curving. like corked sound
my distant pitch emerging.
my stutter improvising i'm
utter pulsing and yearning
for some notes. the linking
of a string of sounds my
hmmmmms and aaahs are
sentence squeakings
reaching through my cracks.
they're urging. sweet side to
side. sweet up and down.
my melting cadence calling.
this drum beat slows
exploding. crackle static. the
dissonance of silence. i'm
voiceless disappearance
yearning turning frantic. it is
the sound of fear i hear. the
reassembled difference. this
subterfuge i feel.

—Julie Coren

When I fell in love with a poet, I wanted to write, but I couldn't talk. I wrote because I couldn't talk and I couldn't understand it, any

instincts in language, I suggest, and you may find that where you somehow find yourself is a lot more interesting than where you planned to be going in the first place. This is a logic of writing as much as of speech—*word by word*—in which language becomes a mode not so much of expression as of exploration—*into the breach*—discovery and pleasure, and it is very much about desire.

As Jane Gallop has written:

> Since for Lacan "desire is metonymy," it operates in the register of contiguity. Thus it appears that in Lacan's writing both feminine sexuality and masculine desire have a relation to contiguity. Perhaps this folding back in of two "opposites" should remind us that feminine sexuality is not the complement but the supplement of desire. The "rivalry" between the two is possible because both operate in the same dimension, the metonymical. The difference is that desire is metonymical impatience, anticipation pressing ever forward along the line of discourse so as to close signification, whereas feminine sexuality is a "*jouissance* enveloped in its own contiguity." Such *jouissance* would be sparks of pleasure ignited by *contact* at any point, any moment along the line, not waiting for a closure, but enjoying the touching. As a result of such sparks, the impatient economy aimed at finished meaning-products (theses, conclusions, definitive statements) might just go up in smoke. (30–31)

Sparks at any point along the line.

What I have been describing describes, at least in part, a certain kind of logic of writing, which will be read differently from different positions along the continuum of gender. For of course the practice of letting meaning grow out of the act of its own making and remaining responsive to the complex threads of language, any one of which may unfold like a Chinese puzzle box if we listen closely and let it, is not a practice that is confined to women or, for that matter, to the inhabitants of any other cultural of it. I started writing by accident or because I was speechless.—Nancy Krusoe

27. I sensed that others were finding out what was happening.

Day 5: We worry. We worry about what to write. We worry about our choices.—Wendy Elam

28. I listened intensely to what they had written and often recognized myself in them.

I want to tell you a story. Yes, a story. A story about a grandmother and her granddaughter and roses. . . .

Danger! Danger, I would say to you. . . .

You see, I am a woman. I am a woman attempting to access a language which is alien to me. I am a woman who has been taught that what I write at my kitchen table with my cat on my lap is less important than anything written by a man in a prison cell. . . .

I am a woman who is a foreigner to herself and to language. I am a woman who can no longer trust her own muse.

How do I tell the story of the grandmother, the granddaughter, and the roses? How do I use the language to tell this tale? How do I access the language to tell a story about a Wednesday afternoon the grandmother and the granddaughter planted a rose bush? There must be a way to assemble the words in a manner which is not alien to

margin. But how women and others speak from the margins is complicated largely, as I have said above, by relative positions to dominant discourses of power, mastery, and privilege. As Xavière Gauthier has argued:

> Throughout the course of history (women) have been mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt (162–63).

This is not an easy, nor a clear and graceful, proposition, but rather paradoxical, confounding. If the only point of entry for women into discourse is one that will subdue them, and the only other option is silence, on the outside, or disruption, on the inside, which thrusts them back to the outside again, what are women to do?

Assume, Kristeva tells us, "a *negative* function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society" (166).

Be at odds with what already exists.

For *all*, says DuPlessis, "All must be re-made."

Which begins, for DuPlessis and for me and for others, with the fundamental rejection of masculine binary logic, by which things must be one way or another: *either/or*, inside or outside, silent or voiced. There are many ways of speaking that do not require voice, and many ways of having voice that do not speak. How familiar it is to so many of us to be inside and outside at once.

Surprise me with flowers, psychologists say, is a powerful paradox, but as my sister argued in her dissertation, there are all kinds of ways you can still act and surprise. Have the flowers delivered at three in the morning. Fill the bathtub with floating camellias.

English 496WW: Women and Writing proceeds by assuming that what DuPlessis calls a "both/

me. The grandmother has cancer. There must be a way to arrange the sentences which is comfortable to me. The grandmother is dying. There must be a way for me as a woman to access the language in a way to fit my own rhythms, my own patterns. The granddaughter does not know.

First, I throw away the sentence.

I begin with no sentence.

I will begin here.
—Peggy Woods

Day 6: I am struggling. I am wrestling with the Bear.—Wendy Elam

I know it takes too long to feel the words, so I remain numb in some places. The process is so tiring and so full of mistakes, but I know the mistakes are a part of writing too. So, I make the mistakes, small and large. I make the mistakes and I close my eyes wishing for it to end. My Mother says I'm the strongest one in the family. I stand on two feet with solid unity and courage. But, the courage dies in my writing process. It all fills the gaps of "true" risk. Exposure on the most intimate level. But, do I trust you enough to undergo the challenge? I don't know. I can't tell the truth because I don't know.

Underneath the fireplace
Is where I've left the key
Turn on the engine and drive as far away as you can.—Alene Terzian

and vision" (6) is necessary and inevitable if women are to enter history speaking and writing *as women*, and this is where we find ourselves when we begin.

Some years ago I came home to find a note from a boy I admired tacked on my dormitory door. In blue ballpoint, on cheap notebook paper, he had scrawled: *What are we to do with all these rocks?* I believe it is largely for this question that I later married him.

When I was still in grade school I learned most of what I know about modes of exploration by rock-walking up and down the upper Sacramento, leaping from boulder to boulder, flat slippery riverbed rock to flat slippery riverbed rock, back and forth across the river channel, watchful for where it was slick with algae, or wet, alert for signs of instability or movement.

Years later, on a bed of granite that sloped all the way to a green glacial lake, far away from everything, with mountains all around and a black star-spattered sky, I lay for the first time with a man.

One boyfriend, for Christmas, brought me back a piece of lava from atop Mt. Shasta, light as air.

Another grew enraged when I hit him with a rock I was aiming for the Blackfoot River in Montana, but I was clumsy.

Once a large stone flew off a mountain trail above me and just missed my head by what my sister, below me on the shale, swears was only inches.

Both my sons could out-throw me by the time they were three, arcing stones across rivers or into wide bodies of water—alpine lakes, the sea.

All of this, all these other rocks, define a way of being in my life, a writerly habit of paying attention to things in the world, from the tiniest of pebbles to the massive granite crags that rise above the Sacramento River Canyon where I still spend summers with my children. But the question posed above—*what are we to do with all these rocks?*—was one that, until someone posed it to me, I had not considered. Since, I have learned to see rocks as both familiar

29. One of the students disappeared.

How to break out of the phallocentric system without simply reversing sides, to do away with sides, achieve the liberating chaos of language.—Marion Heyn

The second thing that had a major impact was the realization that I had been writing in someone else's discourse, a male discourse, the discourse of the dominant culture. No wonder it felt so stifled and manufactured. Furthermore, I realized that I had been writing in someone else's voice virtually all my life. This was a sad realization, the realization that I—and millions of others—have been stifled by absorbing the mainstream ideology.
—Margo McCall

30. The works that we read began to weave their influence into my thinking.

Day 7: (Oh, irony of ironies, my laughter peals the thought that *this* is my first writing class: *This* class, designed to peel away the layers, chip away the unconscious habit of contrivance. I am unlearning things I never knew.)
—Wendy Elam

31. I felt strangely bold and impulsive in my writing.

i must tell you a backward story, the end of language as my start. i can only write in colors now the end of

and unfamiliar, sometimes simultaneously so, and it seems to me that this double-edged vision has a great deal to do, as well, with writing.

Imagine a word as a rock.

A word is a rock is a word.

Imagine a word as a rock. Can you roll it in your mouth, like a round smooth pebble? Will it support your weight? What is the heft of it as you raise it to loft from your shoulder?

Imagine, again, a word as a rock. The first thing in any writing class is to denaturalize it, the process, what it is, language itself, which students practice, not even recognizing what they practice as a practice. Words are complicated this way, the most "natural" of our modes of knowing the world, so much a part of who we are as to be inseparable from how we know ourselves.

What I mean is, writing makes its own difficulties by appearing easy, transparent, communicative, natural. We know this because we remember the whole painful process of writing to "express ourselves," but the true thing is, however much we might wish that it were otherwise, we can't make our texts mean what we want, not just because that is the nature of language, but also because meaning takes place in the reader. Take the long personal e-mail message you inadvertently send to a stranger: how is its "meaning" transformed? There is that, and there is also that the more we push our texts around to make them conform to any prior idea, the worse it is for them, in particular, and, in general, for writing.

It is, perhaps, more difficult to conceive of the materiality of language than any other medium of art. Being ourselves, in some sense, constructs of discourse, we can be said to *be* language, the perfect both/and model: what it is, and what it signifies; meaning and materiality, both. Still, the illusion of it as a natural form of communication persists like the easy arc of a rock across a river. If we can't (and we can't) get outside the arc of meaning, neither can we language is in colors. a sheer and fiery orange lingers in my mind and as i call it, orange, i hear the sound, follow. follow as in hollow. follow as in fallow. follow as in hollow fallow will this be the ending of my language.—Julie Coren

32.

This is a difficult place—this place where language and I intersect—this place where words and form intersect. This is where we will spend most of our lives—stretched on this green grass, leaving the imprint of our bodies when we move on. But there is a place that is outside this place, very near the intersection, as if it was on the verge of linguistic realization. This place will always exist, it too will never exhaust itself. What words grow out of this place will belong to that intersection between language and myself. We can never be wholly united with language. We are at once both form and possibility.—Kim Guthrie

33. I found a new strange music in my heart.

Day 8: I know the danger in a personal way. Good girls learn to play
THE GAME
—Wendy Elam

. . . a story that anticipates the birth of female language while recognizing the inherent irony in even its own attempt to break free

entirely control it. Language, like paint, like musical notes, like marble or bronze or mud, is what we, as writers, have to work with, and like the other media, it follows its own laws and resists our most earnest intentions.

Much of this is derived from elementary theory, starting with Saussure and moving on past Derrida, and I have discussed it earlier (and will later in Critical Terms), but there are additional ways that, for women, language itself is even more vexed. For if, even just metaphorically speaking, the medium women have to work with can be said not to be their own, can be said to be a patriarchal construct, governed by an organizing principle of binary opposition which is hierarchical and in which the "male" pole is always privileged, this writerly struggle to work can be said to increase.

"I am," writes Madeleine Gagnon, "a foreigner to myself in my own language, and I translate myself by quoting all the others (180)."

Or, as Irigaray writes, "For in what she says, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself. She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished. . . . When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. . . . For if 'she' says something, it is already no longer identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything . . . ; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*" (29).

Not merely outside of the only language women have available to them, but literally oppressed by it, on the dark, the dangerous side, of the bipolar oppositions that govern thought, even their own, a construct of culture and discourse which conjoin to deny them, to accommodate their presence through their absence, being constantly deconstructed by the terms of their own existence, how is it possible that women should speak at all?

from a language which,
while not of our own
making, constructs us
nonetheless. While we can
(never) fully escape the
restraints of language, we
can take it in our hands,
shape it, make it our own.
(Now) it's smooth and round
as a ball rolling between my
hands, (then) I lean into it
with the heel of my palm—
pressing, pushing, flattening
it out to paper-thin transparency (until) I can nearly see
through it. Stretching it out,
conceiving new shapes—
I thought it was this
easy—
I thought I was
—Ilene Miele

34. Through my writing I was able to reach my mother.

You lie, You lie, You lie.
I wish my mother
would leave
the room
so I
could
beat
my
head
against
the wall.
—Sue Few

35. Little did I know that she was the one who I had been fighting against and not the instructor.

and sentence after sentence
my heart is pounding. it is
her reaching round the
walls to claim her words. it
is her chiseling at the brick.
the shatter down of
breaking text, the digging in
between and its resist.
—Julie Coren

Speaking as a woman, I can say that it is possible because we are at least double-voiced, honey-tongued. We can sweet-talk. We bracket; we back-talk; we talk in circles. Our narrative strategies are always, to some extent, evasive, not simply because it is too dangerous (and it is) to say what we mean, but also because, as Irigaray says, what we mean is always already something else. The point is that, in saying so, we claim our own authority: we seize the right to be perpetually starting off, to follow the sparks, to accommodate our splittings off of consciousness that, ever splitting off, will lead us into silence where finally we might hear our own voice speak.

And it is possible because we can still imagine a site beyond language where writing takes place.

Of course I know that it is heresy to say so.

English 496WW: Women and Writing is an heretical course. Creative writing classes should so aspire more often.

In such a class, I depend, for my theory, in addition to that I've described before, on the work of Jacques Lacan, whose model of identity I tell as the story of a baby. It is better as a story, because it is a good story, and also because a story makes the theory easier to understand. As one student recently confided in me, she'd never have made it through the Lacan reading in her critical theory book if she hadn't first heard it as a story. So we begin by imagining a baby when the baby is quite young, just an infant really, with a hand flailing out in front of the baby's face, or the mouth puckered up in the baby's phantom suckling. During this period, just after the baby is first born and perhaps for the first six or so months, the baby experiences the baby's self as fragmented, thinking, if the baby could be said to think without language, when the baby sees the baby's hand or sucks the baby's toe: "hand=self"; "toe=self." It is clear that the baby is confused.

36. I had assumed that she would be angered.

and in this mining for myself
i find this hiding self. i find
this woman who refuses,
this woman who denies, this
woman fearful of her words
of writing simple sentences.
of speaking utterances. my
writing excavating nothing.
i am this woman fearful, this
she who writes to claim
herself, who writes to own
herself then disappears
behind the crafted word
dismissing simple honest
thought for words that
sound just right. someday,
selene. someday i hope to
write without erasing
myself.—Julie Coren

37. There were some uncomfortable moments in the class.

Day 9: We have stepped into a maelstrom.
—Wendy Elam

38. Tension rose.

Don't want their stories to tell. Want to tell my own stories. Want to find my own stories. To tell.
—Desiree Wold

I might have said NO when
they asked me I might have
said No I don't do that
when they said do it like this
I might have said NO when
they said yes like that I
might have said NO when
they said a little more I
might have said NO when
they said again I might have
said NO when they said
move like this I might have

From this state of early fragmentation, the baby will pass to another state of integrated wholeness, which Lacan calls the Mirror Stage and which lasts from around the baby's sixth to eighteenth month. This is a nice time for the baby, because during this time the baby will have seen the reflection of the baby's self in, for example, a mirror, and the baby will have had a sudden insight, or recognition: now the baby sees a whole being as "self." However, though thoroughly gratified, the baby is still confused during this time, for once the baby has conceived wholeness, the baby sees it everywhere as coextensive with the baby's self, and especially in the primary caretaker, who remains, most often even now, the Mother. This is the best of times for the baby, because for this brief period in the whole span of a single life the baby experiences selfhood as whole, complete, interconnected. But it takes place in what Lacan calls the Imaginary, and it cannot last. For identity itself, properly speaking, depends upon the subject's entry into language—when the subject, no longer the contented baby, learns, in essence, to say "I." Now, the subject occupies and fills a pronoun signifier, which in the absence of the subject is just empty, and this is in so many ways the saddest part of the story.

Language is part of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order, and of course, once we've entered it, we cannot know ourselves outside it. We learn to say "I," and we become an autonomous self, separate from our Mother and from our image in the mirror: we are not what we once connected to. So in fact, what we can be said to be saying when we learn to say "I" is: *I am he [or she] who has lost something, I am [she or] he who has split off from my image in the mirror, from my mother, I am lack.* I said that this part of the story is sad, and it is, for this loss is fundamental and profound, and it constitutes, for Lacan, the origin of desire, because for the rest of our lives we will be driven to attempt to recreate the feelings of wholeness, integration and well-being that existed in the Mirror said NO when they taught me how to move how to act how to dress how to BE. I might have said NO when they taught me how to move my lips to the sound of their voice how to stop my tongue from rolling and writhing to lay it alongside theirs thick and dead, how to croak and bark and moan to their tune I might have said NO.

but

I didn't. Instead I smiled and (now) they think that I cannot speak without them.—Ilene Miele

39. But I released myself from it.

a metaphor—water, the hydrological cycle fascinates me, it flows and carves, erodes and builds, meanders around cuts through granite softly. It creates itself every inch it flows from within the space it has already traveled and the remainder of its journey to the sea, every breeze and particle of rock accounted for and accommodated, every moment of its existence. Words, too, find expression as they build and carve and move—They breathe light and shadow, sound and silence in each breath through which they are pronounced.

That's too large
a metaphor.
—Rhonda Hakimovich

40. I explored my own tension.

Day 10: Here is a structure that seeks to challenge the dominant discourse, that

Stage, but we will fail because they were imaginary and never existed at all, illusions of grace.

But this is not the end of the story, because this split between the Imaginary and the Symbolic—between being, as we originally experienced it, and meaning, as we learned to express it—must somehow be mediated, for not to resolve it at all would result in absolute rupture, with everything flying completely apart. Hence what Lacan calls the suture, a metaphor of both wounding and healing and an operation that allows us to bind the split and thus hold being together with meaning, and that occurs not just in the construction of identity and self, but also in language, for how else can the sign, contradictorily coherent, hold together if not by the force of the very same desire.

Imagine a word as a rock.

There is a place I go every summer, a cabin that my father built on a small tributary creek to the upper Sacramento, high above Shasta dam. Some days I walk down the creek to the river. At the roiling juncture of waters, rapids back the river up into the creek, the creek edges out, a churning curl, to the river. The noise of their meeting is a single unleashed roar. And I am at my most serene perched on sunbaked rocks in the middle of what is neither creek nor river, but their convergence, for it is here alone, of all the places of my life, that language leaves me, empties out, and I am as close as I ever get to what writing is, in its absence.

Imagine writing as an emptying out of language.

Many feminist theorists, especially the French, are intrigued by the state of being that exists in the Imaginary, prior to our acquisition of language, by which we come into being and will forever after know ourselves. Because if, as they argue, the Symbolic Order is a patriarchal construct, the girl child will be accessible to herself only through the alienating lens of phallologocentricity, and thus she will become something of a monstrosity. And so,

seeks its own validity
through NEW RULES, a
broader definition of
validity, of acceptability
and here I am
Outside of even that.

I am still struggling to find validity regardless of context.—Wendy Elam

41. I didn't know how or where to focus my energy.

I write. I write without much choice. I think of choice. I can't think. Suddenly I am given permission to think, speak. I have given myself permission: Stop, start, pause, start, wait, start. *Wo is das? Is that me?* Start, what? Start, start, wait, pause, pause again, pause, begin.—Ann Holley

a smaller metaphor—a pomegranate, ragged red skin and endless pockets of juicy, sweet seeds cleverly encased in bitter white/yellow membranes. I don't like the way that sounds. Too many adjectives around the nouns.
—Rhonda Hakimovich

42. Something new had begun to develop in me as I wrote.

How will I begin?begin? begin? Find some words, make them march, dance, do a jig. Find some words let them loose, let them sing. Take some words and set them free, let them roll off your tongue, let them sprout wings and fly. Find some words and take them, make

these theorists speculate, if there is a "female" language, it must be said to occur in the Imaginary, prior to our coming into being in a patriarchal order, what Julia Kristeva calls the Semiotic, which is a pulse or sound or rhythm separate from any known signifying aspect. If there is a female "language," it must be said to exist beyond any known system, something we may "feel" but never really "know," something we may only touch upon. I think of this as being connected somehow to the suture, between the before and the after of language, being and meaning, the very logic and desire by which they are held together. And it is a space without words of its own, which is nonetheless pure linguistic energy. Linked to a preverbal memory, it is a space beyond language where writing takes place.

Imagine a word as a rock surrounded by water neither river nor creek but both. Imagine a place which is a state of being where your body empties of what it knows of language. Imagine memory unencumbered by words.

Imagine writing.

In his complex rhetoric of how to read, Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes between activities performed upon the text in reading (see further discussion of Todorov in the first section of the "Critical Terms" glossary in Chapter 13 of this book). The first activity, *projection*, is how we learn to read in school, to look beyond the transparent window of the text to its communicative function or referential value and initiate the whole extended enterprise of interpretation, focusing not on what the text *is*, but what it is about. The goal of the second activity, *commentary*, is close reading, in which we scrutinize the text to illuminate its meaning. And the goal of the third approach, *poetics*, is to see the text as a "product of a fictive and yet existing mechanism, literature" (235), and to develop a general science of that mechanism by defining its general principles and constitutive elements.

them your new language, say them over and over like when you learned French in high school, say them louder and softer, listen to their rhythm, then make them your own.

—Ilene Miele

43. A young man had been able to shatter the silence and peace of my heart.

At the end of my life I will want to lie down. I will be tired. There will be an air of permanence in my sitting, because it will be the end of my life and I will not have to get up again. It will seem that I am peaceful because I will be sitting; completely and utterly sitting. The rustle of future activity will have fallen away from me, and I will be quiet. Quiet at last. Quiet in the way that only endings can be quiet. I will be an ending. Or rather the anticipation of an ending. And so the quiet will be imminent and looming. Anticipated. But it will not yet have arrived. So it will be me, sitting in the gap between culmination and quiet, between ending and ended; it will be me, softly fingering the stuff of my life before I let it go; it will be me, a me that does not yet exist, who will look at the lifetime of moments lined up at the exit and will say to whomever or whatever is around her, "Let me tell you a story."

—Susannah LeBaron

44. I began to see what bound us together.

These are as useful distinctions for writing as they are for reading, for it is easy to see how a corollary for projection in writing is that old bad writing-backwards habit, where we sweat blood and struggle unnaturally to find the right words to express the idea in our heads. In writing, commentary has its corollary in our other old bad practice where we can't stop ourselves from relying on our worn thesaurus and a college dictionary of literary symbols. But poetics helps us understand our work as a whole body of developing work in the context of other like works. One first goal of teaching writing, then, might be to denaturalize projection, and perhaps a final goal might be to provide the context in which each writer may articulate a poetics of his or her own.

If every text must teach the reader how to read it, every writer must learn how to read beyond meaning for the system which allows meaning to take place. I have long believed and taught that writing proceeds out of language in what Barthes describes as an "intransitive act," for who can truly tell the dancer from the dance? From what I know of what it is to be a woman, I also know that there is writing which is both this coming into being of its language in the very act of its coming into being and something more, too, something like a loaded wordlessness, some underlying sound or pulse or rhythm, something like syntax before it is a signifying moment, the sound of a sentence before it has words. I do not think that when this happens in the writing moment we are looking for words to describe something outside of language, but rather that we find ourselves somehow inside the suture, which if it were a place might be the rock I sit on every summer in the churning of waters that are neither creek nor river, but both, and in the roar of which silence might finally open up.

English 496WW: Women and Writing is a course that uses feminist theory to frame a context within which it is possible to conceive of writing as an

She sometimes forgets she is a woman—she often pictures herself as a thin man dying in a far away jungle.—Felicia Kreitl

45. It was language . . . the beast.

And I find it difficult to write from only one perspective while ignoring the others—they are so much a part of me. Everything is so connected that I can begin one place and end up on something seemingly unrelated to where I began, and yet I got there somehow. I have never felt very comfortable with language. Recently I have attributed this to being a woman and a student, both of which are alienated from language and writing.—Kim Guthrie

46. All along I had been attempting to tame this wild thing, to become its master.

Day 11: It is about more than writing.—Wendy Elam

Body, family, sex, my home, friends, dreams, all are aspects that have formed the who-I-am. My writing, although always the center to the life I live, has only recently begun to reflect and bring up the honest language inside me. Everything, to me, is related. Is this part of what being a woman is about?
—Suzanne Ghiglia

47. Then I realized that language is as ephemeral and unreliable as the wind.

opening up of silence that takes place beyond already known systems. Every creative writing classroom should allow writing to reimagine itself, but each must find its own simulacrum to reveal the systems by which writing has been previously experienced. We cannot make them disappear, these systems, for they, like language itself, make writing possible, but they can be made to become a palpable part of the process. This is as much the business of teaching writing as is the literal making of texts. What I am talking about is, in some very important respects, foregrounding the question of what writing is and who we are, and who we may become, in relation to its praxis. By examining these principles, we give our students options to form their own poetics, to choose where they will go and who they'll be as writers.

In my own life I do not think I ever felt that I had options, and my perception of the single, right way to proceed functioned for the greater part of it, both literally and metaphorically, to silence me. When, as a graduate student already in my thirties, I learned to explore the dimensions of that silence, especially as it had been constructed by the various institutions (schools, canons, creative writing workshops) that had governed my interactions with literature and writing, I had no way of recovering the years I had spent either mute or alienated from myself or my writing. It was learning to name both the institutions and their rigorous conventions that changed things for me, and it is for this reason that we begin, in my classes, by naming them over again. In this way, the natural-seeming qualities of writing are demystified and framed with a difference. Thus it is possible to learn to claim writing on our own terms, to make clear choices about where we would locate ourselves in relation to its institutional as well as its expressive aspects, speaking as ourselves, whoever we might be, and in the now-recovered sounds of our own tongues.

I keep my journal, I progress. I am always beginning, I am always ending, I am always in flux. I am not the other. Within myself I am the center. I subvert the fathers as much as possible within the constraints of necessary self protection. I fear rape. I fear death. I move forward. I forgive when it's possible. I write when it is possible, when it is impossible not to, which has been my life. I converse with my sisters and I begin to have joy in writing and joy in my life. It's OK.—Ann Holley

48. I let myself fly in it and on it, through it and around it, above it and beneath it.

We won't go blind if we see the corona, if we eclipse the form, if we let the energy move us, like the tender bodies of young children driven by their most basic erotic needs, pure art, biological, psychological, before the light from our quest hardens them, before they are told they will never grow anymore, only age, in a static, deadly form, before they turn away from their erotic energy because they believe it conflicts with death, before they believe art to be an escape from death, before they believe that any form could hold this much energy, before language, before.
—Kim Guthrie

Day 12: TO MAKE
TO HAVE
TO TAKE
SPACE

In time, it is no longer the first day. It is not, and never has been, in any way an easy process, for our goal requires nothing less than that we rethink the whole concept and material not just of language, but also of self, who we are and how it came to be this way. We move through many stages of ambivalence, euphoria, and rage, and often I miss Eloise, whose perspective always seemed so much surer of itself, charged with such knowledge, wisdom, and grace. But if, to paraphrase Marguerite Duras, we feel "alienated in this new space . . . , it proves, perhaps, it is woman's space" (164).

Then, as the basic principles of the class become familiar—that a rejection of binary either/or logic necessarily embraces both/and thinking; that at least some of the time such thinking requires that we hold contradictory tenets to be simultaneously true; that female identity may be described as multiple, porous, shifting, and fluid; that female experience is often marginalized and devalued in this culture, and that a first step for women writers is to recuperate their own; that, locked outside of dominant discourses, women's languages may be characterized as muted, polyvocal, circuitous, contiguous, evasive, overloaded, multileveled, contradictory, and disrupted by gaps, silence, refusals, and noise; and finally that it is nevertheless still possible to discover and invent forms that may contain both these languages and what they seek to express—we become more comfortable with what we have placed at risk, and why.

Some will argue that such a pedagogy just excludes a different group of students, but we must never lose sight of the metaphorical value of gender, which makes it possible for women to generalize from what they know of themselves to include the experiences of other muted groups, among which students themselves may be counted. For of course the true thing is that in school, or other common institutions that govern the production of writing, novice writers know themselves as among the least powerful constituents. Under the influence of the master writer, they learn quickly to dissolve themselves in their writing and reproduce, instead, what they believe they are supposed to write, and this, too, is a form of silence. Thus, though the fundamental principles of English 496WW: Women and Writing originate in feminism, they are not exclusive to it and can be extended to include all the rest of students.

As DuPlessis writes:

> What we have been calling (the) female aesthetic turns out to be a specialized name for any practices available to those groups—nations, genders, sexualities, races, classes—all social practices which wish to criticize, to differentiate from, to overturn the dominant forms of knowing and understanding with which they are saturated. (16)

To learn to recognize our saturation is a first step toward becoming who we will be as writers. A second step requires that we make intelligible the moves by which we overturn our prior modes of knowing through the articulation of a personal poetics. For as DuPlessis also says, "A poetics gives permission to continue" (156).

Both, then, are necessary—the writing itself, and the poetics that enables us to understand and claim it, and this applies to all writers, marginal or not, since if you cannot name what you are doing, you are bound to reinscribe what has been done before without you. Thus, the strategies women develop for talking about their writing will generalize to others. For all of us along the multiple continua of gender, class, and race, and writing itself, must find a way to talk about what it is we are doing in our writing, to conceptualize it both internally and in relation to its larger system, and thereby to mark the questions that will both sustain and move writing forward, perpetually transformed and never stopping.

It is about more than
writing.—Wendy Elam

I reject metaphors, for
today.
—Rhonda Hakimovich

Inherent in the concept
Writing the Self is the
concept of the Individual.
The teaching method must
frame the questions without
the unspoken hubris of
presupposing a single
answer. The teaching
method must provide the
tools for each individual
writer to begin to shape the
answers for themselves.
Begin to
begin again.
—Wendy Elam

49. I allowed the language to be fluid.

At some point late in the
process
I don't know exactly
when I discovered My own
instincts More than that
In the process of
discovery—excavation,
burrowing, sustained
investigating, translations,
palimpsest—I learned to
trust my instincts.

I discovered that it is **there**,
in that trust, that validation,
regardless of context,
exists.—Wendy Elam

Today we are as much a
part of this mountain as the
mountain itself. Where does
the power in language lie? I

have all the meanings I need. I am, I feel, I mean. Everything taken in—is language that we give back, give back to whom? The grass takes in the sun and gives it back in another form. I can take his mountain and give it back not as a mountain but as a word. Language—that green energy transformed from heat, light, photons. . . . We are the connection, the source. We are the power. Our bodies—particular points within the chaos, a form. Transformation, we are the process. Solid, Diffuse. A vibrating silence. The hum of electrical energy. A word is a spark. And we ignite.—Kim Guthrie

How did I learn this? Certainly, I learned it, at least in part, from Eloise, who in the course of our project taught me many things, not the least of which is that, if something seems to be a good idea, then go ahead and try it, even if it's scary, as many good things are. I also learned it from my students, whose learning helped transform my own thinking about teaching and writing. Though I will miss this Women and Writing class, I know now that the questions I learned to ask in it pertain to every writing class. As teachers, we also have choices about where we would locate ourselves in the whole complex system that supports us, and we must make them while fully conscious of their implications. If all of us at some point and to varying degrees have suffered the encroaching fist of muteness, the point in any writing class should be to smash that fist, in the aftermath of which what we teach and what we do can truly be, as Wendy Elam says, "about writing."

There are no words for the shatter of glass, only sound. The energy released in an explosion of sharp edges and light, reflections and refraction, provides a whole new angle and way of looking at a surface once cold and smooth. The shatter is a sound. It is a voice breaking free.—Margo McCall

Hu/man
I(dentity) am NOT man
Not. Man.
Not man. NOT-
NAUGHT-KNOT
KNOT in my stomach

do NOT have a cock
do NOT have . . .
do NOT . . .
NOT supposed to . . .
NOT allowed to . . .
NOT entitled to
Generic Hu/MAN but
Branded Generic
NO I(dentity)
nothing.
Noone

Negative I(dentification)
But I(dentification) none-the-less
I(dentity) am she,
her same otHER with
No KNOTS, NAUGHTS or NOTS
—Traci Wise

Learning how to write, learning how to let my words fill an Empty page, learning how to listen in between my silence —this new language, these new words, they have changed my life.—Julie Coren

Day 13: It is water for which I did
Not know I was thirsting. Like
Dorothy opening the door after.
spinning spinning
spinning to step
out of that drab house into
Technicolor wonderland I
stepped out of deaf-muteness
Into sounds, song, words.
My sounds. My song.
IT IS ABOUT
WRITING.
—Wendy Elam

i think the trees hold stories waiting to appear—Julie Coren

50. I believe that I am now ready to begin writing.

6 You Bricoleur, You

This essay looks at questions of response as they are manifested in creative writing classrooms. Framed as the last hidden discourse, response presents special problems to creative writing students and their teachers. While I do not claim to have all the answers—or any definitive ones—I open up the conversation by problematizing what we talk about when we talk about student creative writing. A review of my own classroom practices suggests that there are both pragmatic and theoretical issues at stake in response dynamics, and that any balance we might strive for is ephemeral. Perhaps the best we can do is to think and keep thinking about this vexed and difficult subject, and to make our thinking public, as here. For our students entrust us with their writing, and though we might prefer not to think about what this must mean, in the end, what we say or do about it affects the students, in their writing and their lives.

Included in the Addendum are some conversations I have had with students regarding their work.

Reading back through these essays, I think about the old days, the middle days, and now. A lot has changed in twenty years, and a lot has not.

In the old days, because of how I could not make myself fit in, I believed there was something wrong with me.

In the middle days, the days, perhaps, of crisis that I began with, I felt alone in many ways, a single voice among a few, and always on the edge, as if it would never matter how much noise we made. The romantic ideology of the creative writer seemed too persistent, too entrenched in academic circles, never mind the whole rest of the world.

But noise accumulates according to a logic all its own, and I know now I was never alone, nor are we a small contingent anymore. Creative writing students, on the whole, are more receptive to theory, and they are exposed to it more. Writers all over the country are asking the same questions that have guided my teaching, and the creative writing classroom of the future shows every promise of becoming a matrix where the many strands of English studies come together and coalesce.

Sometimes I believe that.

Then, at a writing conference somewhere, a senior fiction teacher will pass me in the hall, sniff deprecatingly and say something to her or his companion, like: *theory heaven.*

I smile politely, for I know my place.

Another possibility, one I would never have imagined, not in a million years when I began this book, is that under the heady influence of highbrow theoretical discourse, we will forget our origins, allow ourselves to be seduced, and turn into theorists instead.

Earlier, I suggested that perhaps it is time to start asking ourselves what we mean, exactly, by creative writing teaching. I posed a series of questions regarding the workshop itself, alternative pedagogical models, goals and methodologies and theoretical perspectives. I asked about what might constitute an effective creative writing curriculum at the undergraduate and graduate level, how creative writing could be most productively situated within English studies, what the ideological assumptions of our enterprise are. What I finally want to argue is that any viable pedagogy must be an evolving one marked by a willingness to redefine itself according to the mutability of time and circumstance. In addition, it should embrace risk, for just as in our classes, we should, in our profession, be prepared to ask questions we won't be able to answer.

Thus, if you were wondering how to turn the discussions in this book to practical advantage in your classrooms, it must be clear by now that my intention is to turn that back to you. Theory in the creative writing classroom is as much a state of mind and a framing practice as it is a material or a subject, and, as a result, we must—each of us—make it our own as we seek to let our students in on different ways of thinking about what it is they are doing when they're writing. But perhaps more important, we should ourselves step ceaselessly back to maintain some small bit of distance on our own ways of thinking about writing. Then, as soon as we suspect we have begun to believe in the absolute truth value of something we do in our writing or teaching, it is time to reevaluate, grow circumspect and skeptical, turn the lens yet another degree. This is not a free-for-all. It is an act of faith that, when we least expect it, language will perform its own small miracle of liberation. For me, more than anything else, theory recasts in a new light what we have always done. In that light, it is possible to make distinctions, to see as we have never seen before our own selves writing—and so, I believe, can our students.

And so it was inevitable that I would return, in time, to the workshop, beginning one spring with a senior-level class. As a heterogeneous community of writers, come together in a large diverse state institution, we would each, I had to assume, seek something both different and the same from our experience together. But when I asked the question—*what do you want from this class?*—students responded, as they almost always do, with the vague assertions: *to write, to improve my writing, to talk about my writing with other writers.* What was a bit different in this workshop was the explicit requirement that we define our terms and reveal their assumptions by framing such questions as: *Write what? Improve according to what criteria? Talk with other writers how?* For, too often in our writing lives we simply stop, at some point, looking at what we are doing. In the aftermath of such shutting down, we fail to ask anymore what we mean by writing, what motivates and guides it, how we would have it judged, and by whom, and in what ways we would have it move through the world. Many people enter workshops assuming that the workshop itself holds the answers to these questions. This workshop began with the questions.

Specifically, we began by trying to define what might constitute for us an "ideal story," though we allowed that such a construct must be mutable and fleeting. A week, or a month, or a story or two later, and one's whole concept of the ideal may have changed. But for that particular moment, for the purposes of that class, I wanted all the writers among us to identify something especially compelling to them among the possibilities of language, form, and narrative, as well as where they would locate their work in this culture, who they would have read it, and why.

That was the first thing.

The second was that we brought the question of response to the table from the start, making it part of our inquiry and practice. Undergraduate students inevitably represent a variety of backgrounds and approaches. Among them, there will be those more or less skilled in traditional workshop critique (how to "fix" the story), theoretical reading strategies (how to "understand" the text according to a particular critical framework), and old-fashioned armchair response (how the story makes you feel). Each response strategy derives from a set of assumptions about the nature and aim of writing, and, while I did not prescribe a critical approach, I asked that in their talk about a story, any story, students begin by describing the very assumptions that preceded and informed their reading. In addition, students were invited to invent their own metaphorical maps for such reading—a geography, a painting, a counter melody.

And the third thing was the principle that writing takes place in the highly particular context of all other writing, a conversation, if you will, to which we must train ourselves to listen. This workshop was part of that training as we sought to imagine where, on the bookshelves, each story might fit.

So yes, it was a workshop, but with the following twist. In it, we "workshopped" not only our own writing, but also other writing we selected in the context of our own. Each story submitted to the workshop was presented in a portfolio, a kind of "sandwich," with two of the writer's most beloved stories—one by a living author, and one by a dead author. As readers, we were not to make distinctions of value between the novice and the published work, but were instead to attempt to discover and articulate what held all three texts together. As writers, we were not to look for other stories that might "sound" like ours, or to imitate the stories we chose, but to discover their shared resonance and how that might illuminate our own work.

I learned this from an artist I knew a long time ago, who would check his work against a masterpiece he loved. He painted quickly, sometimes making several little watercolors a day. Then, by the light of the late afternoon, he'd tack them up on a far wall beside a small Smithsonian poster of a Rembrandt, or Le Corbusier, or Braque, or Klee, or a pre-Columbian tapestry, something unrelated in either style or content. What he was looking for, he said, was a kind of resonance, or "thrumming." If he didn't hear it, he'd tear his work apart and stuff it in the trash. And if I objected, he said, "Can you hear it? See. There's nothing there."

The workshop I taught was our attempt to listen for the *thrumming*. I talk about it here because it was just a workshop, the same as any other, and because, for whatever reasons, it "worked." Our semester's conversation extended itself in complex and interesting ways. Our writing throughout grew stronger and more lovely.

I have thought a lot about this class, its pros and its cons, what went right and what went wrong, and also how, midway through the semester, at my students' urging, we dropped the whole idea of the "sandwich," not as a failure, but as a way of giving in to the standard time constraints of a semester. We had all put one "sandwich" forward for discussion. Students wanted to work through more of their "own" writing, and who could blame them?

But in the second half of the semester, we focused even more directly on the problem of response, and this seems to me to be an absolutely critical space where the disciplines of theory and creative writing can work productively together.

From the start, what I've objected to most strongly in the mentor model of the workshop is the hands-on, fix-it mentality, which works against student writing in two ways: (1) it is, more or less, story-specific—

you learn what to do to "fix" a particular story, but not where to go with the next one, and (2) it contains no straightforward apparatus for success—there always has to be something wrong with each story to "fix." A theory-informed creative writing workshop, in contrast, will be one that makes explicit the whole problem of response, and proceeds by both deduction and induction.

Just yesterday I met a new senior-level class, packed with students I don't know. Because I tend to talk too much, I determined just to listen for a while. Already this class seems smart and engaged, but, faced with an accomplished student text, what they said was: *I liked it. It's really good. I would cut these words here and only use one sentence there.*

To understand where I think we ended up in that workshop I want to review some of my thinking, in general, on response.

One: Students like to have their texts fixed. That kind of attention is both familiar and flattering, and nothing feels as good as success. This also counts for the teacher. When something gets "better," we feel better. Fix-it workshops make for feel-good classes.

I borrow the term *approval junkie* from a newspaper column by a woman concerned with the unbridled praise her pre-school-age daughter was receiving. From dance class to art class to early reading instruction, the daughter was told how "good" she was—a "good" dancer, "good" painter, "good" reader, *good girl!* In her early life, the columnist too had learned to depend on external praise, and now had trouble feeling gratified by her own achievements.

How might we identify pleasure in writing outside the familiar mantle of someone else's "good"?

Two: Most of us are, by training if not by nature, "approval junkies."

Those of us who persist, however, know that eventually we must learn to find gratification elsewhere than external recognition. And yet in our classes we must keep on giving grades, we must keep on making fine distinctions between different degrees of what's good and what's not.

By the time most students arrive in our classes, they have marks all over the texts of who they are. I think this starts in grade school, or before, for certainly some students, even there, are noted for their "creativity," while others, for example, are "good at math." For the most part, our response strategies reinforce these perceptions, and the whole grading system feeds into the expectations of students as "approval junkies." That some students manage to resist these pressures does not mitigate the extent to which it organizes our experience of student writing, our responses to it, and their responses to our responses.

Three: What happens when the teacher is removed from this equation?

I can't say I don't miss the reassuring pleasure of authority, but I'd still argue for the ethics of a democratic classroom that is neither familiar, nor comfortable. This is where a pedagogy of inclusion can gracefully coexist with a methodology conceived as "Outward Bound for writers." Such a methodology depends on three principles of response: (1) preemptive assignments, (2) refusal, and (3) something I will broadly refer to as "poetics."

The first principle depends on exercises, or guided writings, which function as a form of preemptive response because when students are guided through their blank pages, we avoid receiving work we don't really want to read.

My second response principle may be characterized as refusal, or silence, and while this may literally include commenting only on selected pieces of writing and leaving the rest to peer response, it is also a more general tenet. A student once complained that what students want is for teachers to tell them what to do, and I won't. This deliberate refusal derives from my deep suspicion that the boundary between "fixing" and "colonizing" is not stable. So instead I make explicit why I won't give students what they think they want by treating my own methodology as part of what the subject of the course is to examine, up to and including the basic expectation that they alone can determine what they want their writing to be.

> One of my early strategies as a young teacher was to use colored highlighters to mark student poems: purple for good, lime green for get rid of, yellow for ok but not great. Poems came back to me "revised," with all the lime green lines deleted.

This does not mean I don't comment on their work. It means I try not to tell them what to do with it, how to make it "better"—which sentences to take out, which to leave in, and what plot elements to alter. Rather, I attempt to frame my observations as descriptive and nonevaluative, trying to articulate exactly how a text is put together, and why, and what it means that it should behave as it does, and what other possibilities it might embrace.

In practice, it works something like this: I talk. It's not an aimless kind of talking, but neither is it sure. It is a kind of exploration, a little like writing itself, in which I just begin then keep talking until I find out something interesting I didn't really know ahead of time. This is where theory comes in. Loosely speaking, such talk might include observations about how the text is put together, what it does, its disparate narrative strategies and materialities of language, something about structure, temporality, focalization, the conventions and traditions it invokes, how and why it takes the reader in, all my questions, its blanks and open places, what's ahead and what's behind, the whole shebang of textuality, and what comes after. This is me responding until something opens up and there we are.

My third response strategy is to require that students formulate and engage their own poetics. To define the constitutive elements of our own writing, and what we value in it and desire from it, is both highly personal and theoretical, creative and critical. It is, by definition, multidiscursive and cross-disciplinary, unfamiliar and deeply necessary.

But response is a final hidden discourse. More than shameful family secrets, what you say to writing students about what they have written is private, never talked about, concealed.

In an online teaching project, I give students the option of posting comments I've sent privately to them. So why am I relieved when they choose not to?

A Little More on How We Talk about Writing

Cars can be "fixed," so they run. Horse races can be "fixed," though it's illegal. Some dogs are required to be "fixed." But student writing?

Of course it's never easy, knowing how to talk about student texts. Both criticism and praise can be counterproductive, and what are we to do with our own strong fix-it impulse, our clarity of insight on how to make their work oh-so-much-better?

Charles Baxter won't let his students use the words *like* or *dislike*. Listening stops after that, he says. Rather, he has students "describe" the texts.

Jerry Stern used to invite students into his office to talk to them about their writing. He talked and he talked, and they listened.

I do structural analysis, using diagrams and polysyllabic descriptors. I say things like: *Writing is always part of a larger conversation; every story must teach the reader how to read it; whenever we invoke a narrative invention we must reinvent its original necessity; writing is more about listening to where you have been than anticipating where you are going.* I talk sentences. I imagine story shape and desire.

Frankly, I flail. We all flail, confounded by the difficulties of response in general. But what I know I almost never do is interpretation, for, despite the insightful readings of my students (which they learn to produce in their literature classes), I've never been convinced interpretation is very good for writing. Where there's interpretation, there's an equal sign that functions for the most part to reduce the pure necessity of text. And we should be opposed to this, to anything at all that reduces textuality; we should focus our attention instead not on *what* but on *how* texts mean, trusting that meaning will take care of itself, as surely it will, with the reader.

More than anything, I want to find ways to better understand what has happened in any given piece of writing. In the context of a workshop, I want to generalize from this to a larger understanding of writing itself: what it is and does, how it's made, its possibilities, limitations and functions, and the why of it all. In addition, I want students to frame these questions in relation to their own work.

In practice, of course, there is only sometimes a clear object lesson. More often, our talk is like an instinct or a dig. As we work our way through genre and convention into actual stories, we try to figure out what motivates and organizes them, knowing that my strategies for doing so are not unlike my strategies for writing. We begin, dig down, play out, probe, wonder. Reading is in this way like writing, as it also proceeds from language, and often what emerges may delight and surprise us as well.

Even so, it is never sure and is almost always messy, this manner of constructing knowledge out of doubt.

However, it is all we can do.

What One Student Said

> Maybe it's because I'm writing this late, and we've already had our last day in class, and all that (which is always a strangely bitter-sweet moment for me), or perhaps it's because I'm writing this on the heels of a softball game, and I'm experiencing an adrenaline high, but I want to say that I've learned more in these two classes (Narrative Writing and Theory of Fiction) about writing than in all my veritable host of literature and creative writing classes that I've taken throughout my (too) many years of college and high school. Please believe me when I say that I'm not just saying this to kiss up and try to get a better grade. I guess I can't really prove that this is not my intention—you'll just have to trust me on it. Yet, the one thing that I really appreciate is that you direct the class in a way that we discuss what the writer does, instead of why the writer does it and what the writer means. Lit classes bore me to tears when they discuss things like what the writer means in this passage, etc. I mean a couple of years ago it was okay, but now I've had enough of that, and discussions like those don't help me as a writer—at all. The discussions we had in class, even though the student stories that we were doing aren't as good as

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> Wordsworth, and Erdrich, and O'Connor, and Shakespeare, do help my writing. I can see where they made mistakes that I can avoid, and where their narrative strategies worked, so that I can incorporate it into my own writing.—Chris Turner

The Problem of Written versus Oral Response: Or, Some Ways This Has Worked in Class

1.

I wrote long responses to every story any student handed in. I covered their pages with heartfelt remarks.

A. Student portfolios, half-written by me and unclaimed at the end of the term, piled up in my office, year after year, until an act of God (read: *earthquake*) destroyed them.

B. Students sheepishly shrugged when I'd refer to what I had written on their work, mumbling something embarrassed, like, "I dunno, I never can read what you write anyway." (Which is true, I have lousy handwriting.)

C. Students called or returned some years later just to say that they read my comments, year after year. "They mean a great deal to me," students said.

D. Any way it happens, such comments are labor-intensive for the teacher.

2.

I developed elaborate defense mechanisms to protect myself against wasting my own time.

A. I announced that I would not write comments on term-end portfolios unless students provided self-addressed stamped envelopes. Students determined that if they did not provide me with SASE's, I would think they did not care about my comments or their grade. Everyone brought in SASE's. I wrote long responses to term-end portfolios and mailed them back, as promised.

B. I announced that I would not comment on term-end portfolios unless students came to see me during extended term-end office hours. I passed around a sign-up sheet. Everyone signed up. I wrote long responses to term-end portfolios and held conferences for days.

C. I announced that I would not comment on term-end portfolios but would talk to students about their work during extended term-end office hours. I posted a sign-up sheet on my door. Students dropped in, but more manageably.

D. I envy my colleagues at institutions with lighter teaching loads.

E. I cannot curb ingrained response habits and do not have any decent answers.

3.

In the workshop I described above, in addition to the writing, and the "sandwich," and a writer's journal, students wrote peer responses, which were defined as a way for the reader to join the conversation. These responses were to address the question of the thrumming and attempt to describe what held the writer's "sandwich" together. I asked that these responses be descriptive, not interpretive or evaluative, and in the beginning I wrote them too.

Then after a few weeks I stopped.

I felt bad when I stopped. I felt guilty, and I kept promising to catch up. But I never did. In the middle of a major remodeling project at home, my concrete subfloors swelled with water in a vaporous state, there was baseball and soccer and a mean second-grade teacher who yelled and tore up people's homework in front of everyone, and at school I had somehow been named chair of the same personnel committee that had tried to deny me promotion the previous year. Not one to indulge in the "dog-ate-my-work" song and dance, I grew hopelessly behind as more time passed, and I had to accept my condition as fully lapsed.

As I thought about my motivation in the first place to write these responses along with my students, I knew it was at least partly about leveling the field. It was about colearning. It was, in addition, about being a good girl. But none of this answered how bad I was feeling when I couldn't keep up with the pace I had set, and as I thought about it more, I realized that I really wanted to do this for my students because no one had ever done it for me.

Thus, when things broke down in my workshop over subfloors and second grade, it began to seem not so much a pedagogical as a psychological problem, for I finally had to acknowledge the extent to which this practice of writing back to students was driven by my own unfulfilled need: in all my years of classes—B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.—I had received only one written comment on my fiction. It lies before me now, typewritten, yellowed and cherished. Looking back, I realize how much I wanted validation from my teachers, wanted to know they had labored over what I had written, wanted their attention and time, wanted to be viewed as someone worthy of it. I was a bit stunned to realize it was not about writing at all. And then everything got quiet as I realized as well that, despite my years of arguing against a privileged hierarchy of teacher-centered mentoring, I continued to write long notes to students because I still wanted to be seen as having value. I wanted them to like me, which is not itself a bad thing, except that for years my practice had been at odds with my purpose. In an odd and unanticipated way, my response practices had become as much about *me*, the "good, caring teacher," as they were about the student writers, and the system had to break down altogether for me to recognize its limitations and its failings.

Now, as I turned my reflection to the principle of written response in general, I remembered what François had said, years ago, when I asked him. He said he didn't write responses because they negated the whole function of the workshop.

"In there," he said, "we talk and explore and argue and discover something wonderful, and then the student goes home with a stack of stuff we wrote before we ever even talked, and what the student looks at is what the teacher wrote. *That's* what the student remembers, what comes from the teacher, flawed and incomplete and almost inevitably no longer what we think."

By George, I thought, all those years I thought he was making excuses, and now it turns out he was right.

4.

I watch students puzzle over my handwriting and then, I don't know, shrug it off, or shake their heads, or grin with what seems like relief. Then one day I watch one walk off across a weedy lot, seemingly deeply engrossed in what I have written.

Halfway to the parking lot, he turns around and walks back to say, "That was really an interesting discussion, but here from your comments, I can't really tell: did you like it, or not?"

5.

Even so, I am forgetful.

I still have my need to see myself as "good."

I continue to write comments to students because: (1) it is very hard to tell them that I won't (I am a coward), and (2) I forget I once knew that as a practice it is flawed.

A.

One semester I try to extend the conversation. Because I am concerned that students do not read the comments I still write them, I require that they type them out for me and then respond to my response.

Then I respond to their responses. (For examples of such conversations with students, please see Addendum: Conversations with Students at the end of this essay.)

B.

The next semester I try to extend the conversation even further, and ask that in addition to typing out my comments and responding to them, students also summarize the written comments they receive from other students and respond, as well, to them.

Then I respond to their responses.

C.

I ask students to respond to their own work in the form of term-end self-assessments.

D.

Overloaded with response, I wonder where is it getting us?

I throw in the towel but try to keep dry.

Halfway through the term, every student has been through one full round of written response, and response-to-response, and response-to-response-to-response, and I switch to oral comments only, with this twist: after each workshop, the writer whose work was discussed is required to produce a summary of the discussion and to reflect on it in writing, to which I respond.

Some students grumble loudly. We really like your written comments, they say. They also say students don't say anything in class. How are they supposed to know what to do with their work if someone doesn't tell them, they say?

One student comes back often to my office to complain. Already I have had this student in two other classes. He is an accomplished and prolific science fiction writer, and over the course of this past year I have written him more than twenty pages of reflection on his work. In addition, we have met in conference many hours to discuss it. I think I have run out of new things to say. I think he should be able to generalize by now from what I have been telling him for months. For the first time, I am angry at this student's sense of entitlement to me and my time which I see now as utterly depleting. I think he has not listened to anything I have written or said, and I tell him he must learn to pay closer attention. I tell him I'm a teacher not a line editor.

This student is grumpy for weeks.

At the end of the term, students compare their experiences of written versus oral workshop comments. By nearly three to one, they report that the workshop changed for the better in its oral mode. People were more engaged, they say, less stuck to something they had written down, more open to dialogue and insight. Class opened up, they say. We came together.

E.

1. I am forgetful and go back to the way we used to do things, having students write peer responses on every class submission. One student writes two to three pages on every submission, and he learns a lot. Most write a cursory paragraph or so on some of the submissions, and my record keeping is lousy. I am reminded of why I never thought this system worked in the first place.

2. I ask that students write their peer responses *after* class discussions. This is interesting, but my record keeping is still lousy.

F.

I divide the class up into groups and have each group respond to the work from one other group. For the first submission, the response is collaborative, and for the second, one student in each group must select another to write a five page response paper on. We spend so much time on mechanics—who is writing what?—it is ridiculous. But the responses, for the first time, are sustained and engaged. People are really reading, and they are really thinking about their reading. We keep the written comments in books and read them for pleasure.

Nonetheless, a student leaves one class in tears and we spend much of the next class discussing response, again.

G.

My response strategies are in perpetual revision.

On Reflection

People tell me what I write to them has value, and I know that they mean this and, yes, it is nice to think so. But I am thinking, also, of another student, a young man whose critical process was abysmally inchoate despite (or perhaps because of?) his passion for theory. We struggled for a year, this young man and I. He'd never accept a single thing I said without an argument, and I could never follow his convoluted (albeit impassioned) logic.

But he kept coming back for more until one day he said to me, "I've never heard anyone talk about fiction the way you do before. Tell me how you do it," he said.

As many times as I've been asked how, exactly, theory can transform the creative writing classroom, I never really imagined the answer might be as simple as the way we talk, nor as complex as the hard fact that there isn't any pre-existing discourse we can use and that we have to make it up as we go along, a front-of-the-class, seat-of-the-pants, queer bricolage of theory, metaphor, faction, and myth, everything we know about writing, as well as what we don't. Multiplicity, porosity, and paradox are never easy, but until we are willing to cross over boundaries again and again, both at will and by whim, and to pull across them whatever may be useful, keeping at least one foot in every camp, refusing to take sides, but also not letting up at any opportunity, speaking many tongues and risking, always, failure, we are bound to reduce what counts as writing. If we must be a model for our students, then what we should model is the very logic by which writing becomes its own unfolding and all things at once.

The spring my older son was ten years old, I drove on a class field trip to the studio of an artist named Vasa, a sixty-something Yugoslav immigrant who works in plastic acrylic sculptures of brilliant colors and pure, serene forms. Beneath ceilings that seemed to extend almost clear to the sky and washed by sweet light, the children were uncharacteristically subdued.

"It's not what you might think," Vasa said about his process and his inspiration. "It comes from everywhere, unexpected and abstract, not anything you can touch or even name."

Then he smiled and explained that much of his art comes from "accidents, or mistakes" that occur when he is doing what he doesn't know how to do.

Mistakes that occur in the process of doing what you don't know how to do.

I like to say that writing is not unlike math: you begin with a problem, then try out different strategies to arrive at a solution, something, anything to make it come out right. And while I understand this may not in fact be the way math works, a professor emeritus in mathematics once remarked to me that the way I talked about writing was a lot like he did his math.

"You get to a point," he said, "where the only way to continue is to follow intuitive leaps."

What you don't know how to do, where you don't know you're headed: *you follow intuitive leaps.*

"It's like you mess up," Vasa said, "only it's so interesting. You never thought to put those two colors together, but they look beautiful that way so you leave them."

The real work, he went on, comes in trying to teach yourself to reconstruct what has happened, though by the time you recognize the success of your failure it has all become so complex you've forgotten where you started and must begin all over again. And again, and again, and always again, paying close attention as you go along not to miss the mistakes that will happen when you don't know how to do what you are doing.

So that, of course, is art, and it is writing, and it is the first thing we forget in any writing class as we can't stop ourselves from trying to control the final outcomes. Toward the end of his class, the young man I described above wrote a thoughtful response to our workshop in which he argued that we cannot talk about a story without first grasping its content or meaning as determined by the author's intention. Vasa says that in his accidents two unexpected colors and/or lines or forms come together that look good. I think about the concept of control, or mastery, about why we think we need to know what something is about or means. I think about a hike I took on Palomar mountain with my younger son and his friend and my friend, his friend's mother, along a little creek that, from time to time, gathered pools of water deep enough to sit in, and how hot it was, and of what the water felt like on my skin, in the sun, while swarms of ladybugs thrummed all around.

In my own writing, I stick two words—maybe *need* and *desire*—together by accident, and then I write myself into their juncture. This is not driven by an idea or intent, but by the act of faith that is language. Because for me a piece of writing is never first what it is about, but what it is—a piece of writing, the sun on my back, the unexpected accident of color. It is archaeology, dance, a state of being suspended in the suture, a coming into being in the moment of its coming into being. It is not about knowing, but making, in the same mute way the sculptor holds the sculpture to the sander and makes it gleam. You can hire an assistant to hold the sculpture for you, but the sculpture is dependent on the way the body is inhabited as it is being held, and I believe it is the same for writing.

Though our medium is words, the very act of writing depends on it proceeding from somewhere well beyond the normal referential range of language. Words without words, a wave of soundless sound, the space between the signified and signifier that is and is not the center. I want to speak here in defense of not knowing.

What I loved about meeting Vasa was being with a man who has devoted thirty years to a medium he loves that I don't understand. Writing students are all in early stages of apprenticing themselves to a medium they will, if they keep at it, come to love. And they always want it all, and they want it now, because they can see so far beyond where they are when they begin.

But writing is one of those things that the more you know the harder it is. Also, apprenticeship is itself characterized by vulnerability. So it is never easy, between a teacher and her or his students. And we can never fully know. But for me, talking about writing is very much like writing itself—you dig, and you throw things together, and by accident, discover things of interest and value. It takes a long time for the ideas that come out of any writing class to coalesce, to make sense, even to be recoverable at all. Then they all become part of your lexicon and syntax, the discourse that resists the magic fix-it wand, the way you talk writing and know it.

You bricoleur, you.

At the end of that hot trail, we came to a weir where, high above the water, the boys played. My son's friend's name is Wyler Weir.

Wyler Weir played on the weir with my son.

Chapter 6 Addendum: Conversations with Students

1. Exchanges with Students

Here are some response dialogues I have had with students. As I reread them, I am reminded that it's not really as if I don't make "suggestions" for revision or rethinking. But I almost always try to say "why," to locate my comments in a critical logic, which is maybe the best that we can do. In each dialogue, my comments precede those of the student, who is writing back to me. Boxed comments are those I wrote in the margins, and represent second-tier response—my response to their response to my response. I made the checkmarks on their papers to indicate points of strong agreement or response.

Bob Meyer

Bob is a forty-something printer, with an overseas past and a daughter in a prestigious English Ph.D. program. Not a flashy student, he is reliable and steady, a welcome presence. His understated comments almost always hone in on important points.

The story we're discussing here is a fairly straightforward, classic minimalist narrative. In it, a husband and wife return from LA to the small southern town where the wife grew up to help the wife's mother, who is in a prolonged medical crisis. The husband (who makes a living writing porn), left on his own for much of the time, strikes up a friendship with a local man, who eventually reveals to him the true story of his wife's brother's death some years before. There is whiskey and a cemetery involved.

Response Dialogue
"Balancing Act," by Bob Meyer

Bob—OK. I read this story out loud to myself with a rich degree of pleasure. The language did that. I thought, here is a story with a clear sense of its own authority, sentence by sentence, and I loved reading it. It is extremely well written and constructed, highly polished, well done, complex and resonant.

However, I could not write my comments immediately afterward, and this was a problem because now several hours have passed and I am not so enamored of the story as I was—not, please understand, for anything in it, so much as what is in me—and that is a basic dissatisfaction with the conventions and implications of high minimalism, which this most assuredly represents.

1. I feel as if have read this story many times before.

2. I have never been comfortable with how minimalism represents blue collar people.

3. I feel like so much is being compressed and reduced. (I know that is under the surface, but still . . .) When I have a need for things to expand. (I said this was all in me.)

4. It does feel extremely controlled and controlling.

Enough. Given the conventions of the story—reading it entirely on its own terms—I think you have only a couple of things to worry about.

1. Oddly enough, the life in LA section and all the narrator says about it feels more "clichéd" and less fully realized than the whole rest of the story. Although I love the fact he does not seem to know his wife.

2. Long before you make it an explicit part of the story, I really resist Jimmie Williams's telling of the story. His habit of withholding is annoying even to the reader.

3. I found the story of how Jack got shot, well, not surprising enough. Something more has to be hidden in it.

4. I would give you more permission to evoke the landscape more frequently and in a more sustained manner.

That's about it. I admire this story enormously for its honed quality, and only put forward my feelings about minimalism for you to think about. Plus, one more—it's pretty dated. I do this only with the most accomplished writers, to whom I am fond of saying, "If you write this well, what more can you do. What else? What's next?"

That's because I almost always feel that the point to move on is the point where you get really good at something. Anyway, think about the aesthetic and ideological assumptions of minimalism, consider how, exactly, you would want to align yourself with them. It's a question, and maybe a little bit of a challenge.

I think this is awfully good work.

Professor Haake:

I was very pleased and most pleasantly surprised that you liked this story and the writing in it . Your comments are extremely thought provoking and I will give them my utmost careful consideration. Your comments on minimalism are especially noted.

Oh, that's interesting.

I did not live in the United States for most of the 1970's, so I was not around for the "minimalist revolution," so to speak. I really only came in contact with Raymond Carver three semesters ago here at CSUN and have been very enamored of and fascinated by his work. This has crept into my work, as you can see, and I really had no idea that it was dated.

Well, it may not actually be dated. But it has moved forward and changed.

I do have trouble, at times, coming up with new ideas and twists to put into stories like why or how Jack got shot. I tend to ✓ draw on realistic, personal events and need to learn to "stretch the envelope" a little more. I just have a conservative nature and need to let it break and burst with the hidden radical inside when I write. I am too much a believer in what King Solomon said many years ago that, "There is nothing new under the sun." Or as Bob Dylan once said, "All the great books have already been written."

And it's up to us to rewrite them.

✓ I suppose I am trying to carve out my own little corner in the vast literary universe and am still struggling with how to take subject matter and make it interesting enough to read. I also do tend to get into ruts with the writing—writing the same way over and over, so your questions of "what's next? what else?" are quite apropos. Any suggestions on how to "break through" and find that next step? How to try something new at writing, without it coming out in too obvious a way?

I think, too, that we men tend to find something we're good at and stay with it. Women, in my experience, tend to be more adventurous in leaving known ways and trying something new. I'm not talking about physical things, because men are always trying to do something new physically, whether in the gym, on the playing field or in the bedroom. But I mean psychologically and artistically, like one does when writing.

I don't feel I am all "wrote out" of my "minimalist phase," but I will make a conscious and concerted effort on my next project to try something different. Thanks again.

Bob

I'm glad my comments were useful—and anyway, this is a lot about what I mean about writing as a conversation. You have your instincts and language, but you also need to stay current. It's a delicate balance and you are doing awfully well with it—given, especially that you've only just discovered Carver.

Where were you in the '70s?

Write about that . . . ?

(I know, you probably have. But maybe write more . . .?)

Rebecca Baroma

Rebecca, a Filipino American in her twenties, is an extension student earning credit to qualify for graduate school. She's got a wild side to her, and, as is evident from her poetics in Chapter 11 ("Map 4: Poetics"), a strong, if conflicted, sense of her own voice. Rebecca is always on the edge, always intimating she may not be back next semester. Plus, Rebecca often feels misunderstood. It is, I must say, a very attractive chip she carries on her shoulder. She's petulant and vulgar and challenging and sexy and wise and writes like a dream. Both a waitress and an actress, she's been taking classes with me for two years now, and has been to the Philippines at least twice in that time. Last spring she told me I was the only person ever to take her writing seriously, but I don't believe this.

Rebecca struggles with the concept of story. Most of what she writes is fragmented, often having to do with cultural conflict and her memories of girlhood visits to the Philippines. In this fragmented text, she finally pieces together the story of how her father, as a boy, watched his mother being killed by police during a political demonstration.

Response Dialogue
"Untitled," by Rebecca Baroma

Whew, Rebecca,

I have saved this story for last. I always save the stories I am looking forward to for last. I think how I want more time. I think how I'm not disappointed how the story reaches and pulls and resonates and is complex and difficult and soaring. But to organize a response?

1. I love the narrating agent, the girl in the church, her relationship to God, the longing and the struggle it revolves around. I am absolutely content—no, convinced by her presence and her energy
2. The stories—the 2 stories. Or is there just one? That banana. It makes me happy too, to have it rescued, smooth, from the table. He is the father? Then, the other story—the mother? (P.S. what a dope I am— it says clear and plain she is the mom.) This I admit confuses me. The stories are beautifully and vividly written. But maybe there is too much space in the text as a whole?
3. Or not enough writing because, oh I could say that I want more. All these relatives, their stories and relationships, that landscape. Yes, in a way I do want more.
4. But the story is completely cohesive and compressed and held together by paradox, the desire and dread, escape and annihilation, however you want to form it. Held together—by the next generation? The storyteller? The ambivalent hold of God.

5. A dialectic? The two stories being resolved at another level. Can this contain the dyad? (When I always want things to last in three's). Is the narrator the 3rd part. Maybe.

Maybe a little more clarity, a little less blank space, a little clearer sense of who they are and how they come together.

in the sky with the banana

through a storytelling daughter

maybe some fourth reflection on the telling of the story itself—its imperative and prohibition. Why she needs it.

maybe repetition

maybe more writing, but still the same stories

in and out of time

I loved reading this

I want you to write and to write and to write—not just all the stories but the writing of other stories, why it is so necessary—which, of course, it is.

Try a more recursive narrative—a looping back.

Dear Professor Haake,

Thank you for saving my story for last. How did you know to save my story for last? Actually, you don't have to answer that because I think I already know. You are my #1 fan.

You talk about how you want more time. I think about how I wish I could start my life over so it could be "better." But, then I catch myself and I think that I would be a different person with a different voice. Either way, it makes some drama for some writing. My friends make fun of me and call me the "Drama Queen." I need to loosen up, they tell me. Why? I ask. You're so negative, they say. Oh, well. If that's what they want to think. But they love me anyway. Who else will put the world in check? Who else will care?

But I never thought of myself being that deep until recently. Maybe because I was really whacked for a long time, doing what I was "supposed" to do, not thinking and following what was "right." It makes me sick to my stomach when I think of those days. But I think I'm really whacked now because maybe I'm too deep. I only feel that way because a lot of people can't relate. And I can be really angry and get rude sometimes. It's the animal in me that wants to bite. But I don't plan anything. I work with what I got and I improve off of people. Just like I am when I write.

"Narrating agent"? I have to think about that one. It's a new ✓ term for me. I think I know what it is but I have to put the word together with the meaning. But I know what inspired me to write this piece. The assignment was due and so were many of my other "obligations" to my mother, my father, my family, God, my people. And it just came to me as I was sitting in church praying for forgiveness, for what? I don't know, but if that paper doesn't resound guilt then I don't know what I'm talking about. It was the guilt that is embedded in me being Catholic and Filipino. I think I need some Prozac or something 'cause it's all in my head. It's all in my head.

Yes, as we had discussed in class, it is the father and the mother. I read it and I don't see space. My sister and my brother read it and they feel that it's good enough for them. My mother has never read anything I wrote but for some crazy reason I think she got a hold of an earlier version of this story. She's never complimented my writing. One day she picked up one of my books *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn, an Asian (specifically Filipino) American author, and she said I could write better than she could. Now that freaked me out. It really freaked me out. I don't even want to go on with this story. I'm not ready to tell it yet. But you know what I mean. Anyway, someone who knows my family and me relatively well didn't comment on too much space. But the people in this class and you ✓ mentioned "maybe too much space?" That is so interesting. I don't know what to tell you all about that because I can try "burrowing" but I'm not sure if it'll feel right. I mean, I know it will not feel good. But I also know that if I did "burrow" I will probably get some brilliance out somewhere in between, then I could edit and work on it. But it all sounds too horrible to do. Then, again, I don't know because I never tried. That, again, is another issue. Partly it is because I am lazy but most of all it is because, as you have heard many times in my responses is that I'm chicken. But I'm cool. I'm getting a lot of support, feeling a little better about myself and I am not getting any younger. So, you'll be happy to know that I may continue to write if the flow is consistently moving. It's hard to say. I am too human. (Did I mention my friends call me "Drama Queen, yet?") I'll make it connect somehow. We're all connected. Some of us just don't get it. I wish I didn't get it sometimes, but not really.

We see the space because we are not in the family.

This is a good technique.

I cannot believe that you see all that I see. But you seem to have a more clear grasp of what's going on with the story overall (narrator, writer, reader, etc.). But I think that's what you're trying to tell us without "telling" us. How can you really tell anyone what's going on? They'll only get it if they learn from it.

What is so important about "dialectic" and to "last in three's"? Is there some sort of guideline for balance? "What gives a story balance?" Is that the question? Or are you asking me something else?

> I think I need to pay more attention to the stuff I like to read than just to read them and see what I can steal from them. I do. But I need to work on trying to talk about them. I also need to write. I will try to write. That's just another "priority" that I need. But it's alright. I'll deal.

> Balance is a good term. Things in and things out of balance. Something to think about.

Monica Johnson

Monica is nineteen years old, outspoken and assured, and strongly self-identified as a black woman writer with a purpose. Her purpose is to tell her story—her way—and you can either meet her there or not, if you "get it."

The story we're talking about here is "autobiography," as opposed to, say, "autobiographical fiction," though this did not come out until our class discussion. (I write more about this actual exchange later, in "Map 3: Self-Reflections and the Scene of Writing.") In her narrative, Monica describes the events both immediately before and after an abortion. One striking element of the narration is that it is completely linear and nonselective. Events are included as they happened, described with the same level of detail and narrative tension as the abortion itself.

I include our exchange here because it demonstrates how clearly at cross-purposes we can sometimes find ourselves in these discussions.

Response Dialogue
"The Child I Got but Did Not Get," by Monica Johnson

> Monica, you know how I am always saying that "every story needs to tell the reader how to read it?" This is a long and complex "story" that has not yet shown how to read itself as an organized sequence of events. I guess it's not really as "unorganized" as the organization is simply sequential—one thing happens, then another and another, all are narrated with the same degree of dispassionate narrative distance, mostly summary (telling not showing). However, it starts with a more dramatic scene, leading us to anticipate a fiction about the relationship between two cousins. Life organizes itself like this, Monica, not fiction. (Just for an example—the cast of undeveloped characters who move through the narrative as if at random . . .) And so I cannot help but wonder if this story isn't autobiographical. (I'm always reluctant to say so, especially given the personal nature of this material . . .) And if it is, then it needs to conform to a whole different organizing principle.

Fiction generates tension by sequencing events to raise questions about what will happen and what it might mean. Autobiography, and any form of written nonfiction, begins by presenting a speaker and an observation and conclusion, which the text then investigates or explores in elaborate detail and depth. I need to know what you want from this story, which is rich and full of life.

If it is fiction, I'd recommend starting with a line like: "When I asked my baby's father for a ride to the abortion clinic, he hung up in my face—not because he wanted the baby, but because he was sick of me."

If it is an autobiography, I say start with something like: "When I had my abortion, I was eighteen years old, two months out of a group home, with two weeks to go before college. I had nowhere to live, and an ex-boyfriend the father of the baby, who hung up in my face when I asked him for a ride to the abortion clinic."

Begin where the story counts and only include what's essential. There's a lot to admire here, but it really is yet to be "written."

I hope you will continue to work on this important piece, and will be interested in the class reaction.

MY RESPONSE TO YOUR RESPONSE

I appreciate your comments, but I think that everything I've chosen to include in my story is relevant. The reason why I organized it the way I did is because, I want to emphasize on the many events surrounding that period in my life. The many characters are undeveloped for a reason. They randomly came in and out of my life and this is reflected. They don't need to be developed, I think, because the story isn't about them. It is only about the roles they played. I find yours and the classes' reactions interesting, because many others have read my paper and felt the impact. Especially, women who have had abortions. This leads me to question how you could say that it was written with a "dispassionate narrative distance, mostly summary." I wonder how much more emotion I can express other than stating that I wanted to run off the face of the Earth. (I personally can't read it without getting teary-eyed.)

As I said in class discussion, I believe audience is a very important factor. Someone actually had the audacity to say that it doesn't seem realistic! Everything I wrote happened, therefore I think one has to be able to relate.

You recommend points where I should start, but I find that insufficient. Daryl hanging up in my face was very minute, as far as I'm concerned. It was painful, but it was nothing in comparison to the other pains I felt.

I admit I have a long way to go. I will continue to work on this chapter of my life, until I get it right, but the sequencing is how I want it. You asked, what I want from this story. Well, I want to share my experience and I hope that others can learn from it. I want to write it for my unborn children, as well as, "the child I got but did not get." I also want to write it for all of the women who've went through this painful experience. I want to write for those who think abortion is easy. I want to write it for those who think abortion is bad. I'm writing my autobiography so that I can come to terms with my reality. My autobiography is about lessons learned and that's why the end seems like an essay. Each chapter will be written in short story format and unfortunately, many people and places come in and out. I like the fact that you said, "Life organizes itself like this, not fiction." I intend for my autobiography to be organized like life, because this is what it's all about—my life. I also don't feel the need to tell the reader how to read it. Read and if you feel me, you do, if you don't, you don't. I have a specific audience in mind, I can't nor do I intend to appeal to every one. I've never read a story that told me how to read it. I've always been led to read the story based on my own personal interest in the content.

You may like to think so—but where did you learn to read? What texts did you read, and how did you get them? All this made you who you are as a reader.

Monica—OK. But this response is more passionate and deeply felt than anything in the story you wrote—because it is unmediated, I think. I *know* you felt the events in your narrative deeply, but saying so does not create the emotion. In writing, that grows out of scene (show, don't tell) and expression. And I suggested the beginning to illustrate the different structuring principles is all. Any kind of writing—fiction, autobiography, you name it—grows out of and responds to conversation. You can't just talk to yourself.

Margo McCall

Margo McCall is a smart and accomplished graduate student, new this year to our program. I know little more about her than that she is somewhere in her thirties and works, I believe, in a downtown office. I may think this about an office because she told me, or because she comes to class dressed in office clothes—nylons and pumps and neat skirts with jackets. This dialogue responds to the first work of hers she submitted, a highly sophisticated story anchored with "facts" from natural history and chronicling the lives of a couple of suburbanites trapped on the far edge of the California desert. He is a chemotherapist technician, who deals with toxic elements that save lives even as they poison them, and dreams of climbing Mt. McKinley. She watches the neighborhood as it is transformed from one of promise, to one already in rapid decline. This dialogue includes Margo's summary of peer responses and of my response.

Response Dialogue
"Halflives," by Margo McCall

Margo,

This is awfully well done and affecting—a poignant and restrained narrative about a familiar condition, without becoming tedious or predictable. The writing is precise and fully resonant throughout, and Ric's dilemma—and his selfishness—are both apt and painful. We know what this is like; the bearing witness to the chipping away at the land and the being trapped inside it, no way out, an eerily contemporary story. Smart and considered.

Think of story as placement, displacement, replacement.

Think of closure as the success with which a narrative manages the surplus of signification set in play along its syntagm. Then think of an alternate narrative logic as one that is organized according to a charge of metonymical accumulation.

I am getting to something.

But, first I love the organization—fact- and natural history-based structure of this work. This structure derives from exactly the same logic as my fact-of-the-week project—that the world is loaded with pre-existing organizing structures that should, at the very least, engage our curiosity—if not our purpose—as writers. All this and more.

Against the binary opposite of artificial housing tracts and toxic medicine.

It's really quite wonderful, what you have done. But yet there are two things I resist, or several.

1) It's planned system. There is a level at which this all was worked out beforehand, as if the writing itself became mainly a process of filling in the blanks. That sounds harsh, I suppose. But the scaffolding—mountains and weather and flowers—what it holds together is placed under tremendous pressure. That is where the logic of metonymical accumulation comes in. Are you listening—really listening—to what you have written? Or thinking, instead, ahead to what you will write?

2) Binarism. Too neat and potentially polemical. Why can't the toxic medicine really work and not kill? Why must they all be stopped?

3) This, though, is my major reservation. The clinical, dispassionate voice of the intersections bleeds into the stance of the rest of the piece, which bears, despite its structure, the impermeable residue of minimalism. All that restraint. Every sentence cut short. I don't know why I resist this—it's so awfully well done. But I do. I want the sentences themselves to defy the stultifying trap of Ric's

existence. I want them to surprise and they don't. They just contain. (This is the next step in writing, and an important one. Each sentence.)

4) And frankly, I'd like less narrative sympathy for Ric and considerably less patronizing done of Adele. This we can talk about in class.

I really loved reading this story, Margo. It was a surprise and delight, and I will look forward to reading more of your work.

When a story reaches a state of stasis, why not bring it to a workshop? I've been trying to revise this piece, wondering if it was finished. I was lost. I felt like Ric, wandering around on Mount McKinley, a blizzard of words marring his quest for questions answered. The class input cleared the air a little. Although I'm still not sure what I want to do with this story—maybe send it to a rest home for retired minimalists, ha ha—but the process of being critiqued once again added a little to my understanding of myself as a writer.

I wrote this story maybe a year ago. I was simultaneously doing research on radiation and mountain climbing. I thought of that old Reese's peanut butter cups commercial where two snack addicts collide in a hallway. You know, the one that says, "You got peanut butter on my chocolate." "No, you got chocolate on my peanut butter." I was shopping around for new tricks. I smooshed the fact with the fiction.

Candid reactions from a variety of readers are always helpful. After the moment of icy silence, when the writer prickles with panicked images of being publicly trashed and humiliated, having the self-illusion of writerhood crumbled into a withered ball, after the praise and generalizations, the good-hearted acceptance—this is when the good stuff comes tumbling in.

As usual, I was amazed at the things readers found lurking inside a story—things of which I had no inkling. As usual, some suggestions rang true (especially Susannah's suggestion to do more with poor Mr. Martinez). Others did not. I found the class responses to be more useful than the written responses by colleagues.

Here's what they wrote:

— Most noted the prevalence of landscape as a character. One said it was more powerful than the characters. Landscape is.

— Most felt the emptiness of Ric's life, and the void the mountain fills.

— Some noted that Ric is tremendously flawed. He is selfish. He doesn't care. One student renamed him Vic. One student said he could identify with him too much, another not enough.

— The facts/subtitles evoked mixed reactions. Some looked to them as signposts to guide them through the story. One student couldn't get enough. He wanted to read descriptions of radiation treatments and pool schematics. Every response paper took note of their existence.

— Reaction was also mixed as to the restrained writing style. Some wanted it to be wilder and more passionate. One viewed it as evidence of a quiet longing, with passion only momentarily bursting through.

Going into the workshop, I was aware that my story might not be experimental enough to fit the class model. I was aware of the story's flaws, and that somehow it had reached a stage of near-blinding polish. I figured it would be criticized for being too neat. I didn't care. I have only a minimal desire to conform.

Being that we live in a hierarchical society that values education, knowledge and experience, I was, of course, most interested in your evaluation. I was flattered that you enjoyed the story. Don't worry, praise won't go to my head. I will always think I'm not worthy, and I'm more concerned about the areas that gave you problems. I appreciate the time you gave to your evaluation. I plan to give each of your "resistances" prolonged and serious thought.

Speaking of resistance, I'm not opposed to trying new things. I love learning. I enjoy literary theory. I've tried all kinds of weird stuff in the past, and plan to continue to work away at advancing fiction, helping bring it into a form that can best represent an age of rampant change. But these endeavors still don't feel real. It still feels like a self-conscious attempt to be different. And I have some worries, like what if ideas for "Millennium Writing" merely breed another type of Iowa writer—a breed that strives to be self-consciously different instead of sleekly, smoothly the same. I just have some concerns, is all.

But I'll probably come around to your way of thinking. And I welcome the discussions of writing and so forth, and am not easily offended. Let it rip. I can take it.

2. Term-End Self-Assessments

I learned from Wendy Bishop to have students write responses to their own work. Just write, she tells them, what they think she would say, which mostly they already know since she has trained them. Also, we know from our writing—mostly we know where and when we are slipping or fudging, and mostly we hope no one will notice. Just this one time, we think, let us get away with this, and then we will never, ever go there again.

Self-assessment, however, is not always about failure but also about what we do right. In this way it is related to poetics.

I use term-end self-assessments off and on, with varying degrees of success, and I recently tried them again as a follow-up to our other response dialogues. These are shapely pieces, put together in reflection, and I include them here to remind us that while it may sometimes seem that no one is listening, that is rarely the case.

Jon Pickett

Jon Pickett is a quiet, twenty-something white male, struggling with issues of his own identity and writing. Like Rebecca, he needed to earn some literature credit to qualify for our M.A. program, because he majored in biology as an undergraduate. I first met him in Theory of Fiction, where he was uncertain about his own writing aspirations. Later, he would tell me the "burrowing" exercise (see Chapter 9, "Map 2: Burrowing") changed things for him: it made him desire writing, and convinced him he could do it. This self-assessment came at the end of a workshop he enrolled in the following term. He is still struggling, and he is still writing.

> **How and Why I Write—My Personal Motivation**
>
> When I was a small child, I was exposed to a very conservative environment. Both of my parents are and were very hard workers and the "Almighty Dollar" was to be pursued at all costs. This is what was instilled in me very young. Therefore, the Arts and all things creative were respected, but not considered a proper hobby like football or baseball. And if your hobby was reading or writing, you were a freak and an outcast. I didn't want to be a freak nor an outcast, but I have always had a love for all things literary, especially reading.
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> To make a long story short, my undergraduate degree from the University of California at Irvine was Biological Science. Very dry and very safe and very practical for getting a lucrative job out of college. This was true and after I worked as a lab assistant for a couple of years, I found it overwhelmingly unfulfilling. Not financially, though, just spiritually. In the meantime, I was reading every book I could get my hands on and telling my friends about them, etc. Then I had a revelation. I needed to become an English Major and become an English Professor. It was the only thing I was ever really good at and really loved. So here I am at CSUN as an English Literature Graduate student on the road to his PhD.
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> "But what about the writing part, Jon?" you may be asking yourself. Well that came as a surprise. I had never written a complete story or anything creative since I was in the third grade. I had always admired writers and never thought I could do it. Then I took Literary Theory last semester and was forced to be creative. We were told to write stories using "Burrowing" techniques and told to come up with fictitious writers and make up their stories. And guess what? I tried it and found that I wasn't terrible at it and I haven't stopped trying to write ever since. I found a solace and a

complete center in the act itself. It keeps me grounded and allows me to express things that can only be expressed literarily.

"So, where have you been and where are you going, Jon?" Well, I'll tell you. I am not going to stop. From the first time that someone said that they liked what I wrote and especially after the first time I got up the guts to give something I wrote to someone, I have fallen in love. I have never experienced such fulfillment and soul-deep pleasure that comes from finishing the last line of a story that you think is not half bad. It makes the world seem like a much better and less complicated place because I have the means to answer all of its questions in a single sitting if I feel like it. And if I don't, I can write myself into a quiet place where I can be alone or with a billion people completely unlike myself. I think of writing as a "psychic safety net." When I feel like I am falling out of touch with my life or my goals or even my desires, writing allows me to analyze all of this and keep me on the straight and narrow.

I believe that the written word is not supposed to be easy: I think that is what T.V. is for. If you want to understand something right off the bat and not be challenged at all, then pop on the tube. And I don't think there is anything wrong with that. It is nice to turn the old brain off once and a while and just phase out. But stories and writing come from a place that directly affects different parts of different people because all of the symbols we call "letters" are translated differently in every single person. A scenario on paper looks the same to everyone on the paper but when it is read and interpreted, the vision is distinctive to the brain of the reader. That's why the reader, as well as being entertained, must be challenged. The challenged brain will become more enwrapped in a story as it tries to analyze exactly what's going on, and when the reader understands what is going on or makes an assumption, the reader is that much more fulfilled than being merely entertained. This is why I want to keep experimenting. My parents call it weird and a lot of people don't understand what I am doing half of the time, but I think that is how I will find my truest voice: through constant and sometimes embarrassing, trial and error. I believe that after slogging through all of the crap, a jewel will shine out one of these times and really represent who I am as a writer. It will be the purest reduced form of everything I have ever written and will be able to serve as a mental template for future works to come. I am excited to reach this point and I am undaunted. I have a lot of crap to get through, however.

So in essence, my writing is very selfish. I really don't think of the reader, I think of the process and the end result of it. It makes me feel great and will continue to do so in the future. But now that we have all of this "Art," how the Hell do we get it published? That part never gets explained.

I am glad you have found your way to this beginning in writing. I think you are doing it "for all the right reasons" and to me this means it will continue.

Maisha Haynes

Maisha is a black woman with both a strong commitment to writing and uneven work habits. I have known Maisha for years. Sometimes she performs exceptionally in class; sometimes she does not. She wears African fabrics and jewelry, and carries on and speaks out, and I am always very glad to see her.

Why I Write

There is no because to the reason why I write. It is not as natural as breathing or blinking. It is my voice I discover and express with the pen on my paper. It is a crucial element in my life. To write. The words make me smile. Anything too serious is a danger to my spirit.

I had certain expectations of this class at the start of the semester. I expected to grow as a writer. I expected to grow as a critic and expand my understanding of how to say what I am feeling or how to fully develop my characters. I wrote on the first day a little about my expectations:

> *What I expect is growth. It is inevitable. It is beautiful. It is happening every day and I love it. To be surrounded by others with similar desires, goals, plans, and experiences is comforting. More than that, it is supporting. We can support one another as we grow—together.*

This semester, I did grow, but I also kept in mind that what I am searching for as a writer is not something to be found in a class or a book or through the mouth of a Professor. My intended audience is African-American, mainly female. The make-up of this class is far from that,* so the reactions I received were not as in-depth or helpful as I wanted them to be.

I have two majors, I am a Pan-African Studies major and an English Writing major. I completed Pan African Studies a year ago with emphasis in Psychology/Sociology/Anthropology. I am very interested in the way Black people (usually women) live in America. All of my stories, poems and writing are about Black people and relish in the beauty and diversity of my culture. A quote comes to mind, I don't remember who said it, it may be an

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* This class was, however, ethnically mixed, and it included (out of eighteen students) five African Americans, two Asian Americans, a Latino, and an Armenian Russian immigrant.

African Proverb—"I am because We are." That is what comes to mind every time I pick up a pen and paper. I want to pay homage and give praise to my ancestors through everything I do.

The writers I admire and strive to be like are Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and so on. An advisor in the English department at CSUN (I won't say any names) told me when I said I wanted to major in African American Literature, that I should not limit myself. I was angered because there are no limits to what I can contribute to the world of literature.

I write to liberate my mind, which in turn liberates my spirit. I would go insane in this country, in this system, without an outlet. I do not believe the world is against me, but I do know the world is not *for* me. In order for me to make order of this chaos, I write.

You, Dr. Haake, are a theorist. I view theory as too serious. It can definitely be addictive, it gives names to the things we writers do. It makes the process a bit more special. Like metaphor. The word sounds important, like naming your dog. But a dog is still a dog with or without a name. A story is still a story with or without theory. It is like theory makes language/stories/writing more important. My fear is that it will make me stray or get so stuck in the process that I will abandon resolution and conclusion. There is nothing wrong with theory. Remember, *Theory is Art.*

The experience of being in this class has given me headaches and has made me laugh. I hope you have also learned from this experience, and I would be interested in reading a response from you on how you felt about this class. That could be a part of a log you keep on every class you teach—if you don't do that already.

See you next semester.

Alexis Frixione

Alexis Frixione was raised in Argentina and moved to the States when he was in high school. He is a tall and lanky boy, with a political consciousness and literary aesthetic charged by his experiences in another country south of many borders. One story he wrote was about a boy who lived in a tree and whose best friend was a small moon that orbited his head, whom he betrayed in the end to watch a boxing match in a barn. Another was about a man whose hands could make lifelike clay figures but who started walking north instead, to the land where men-in-suits live in high-rise buildings, unaware that the walls of their buildings are inhabited by others like the man whose hands could make lifelike figures. His published work in the *Northridge Review* was recognized with a "Best Fiction" award. At a recent publication reading, he arrived with a life-sized doll, made of stuffed clothes and nylons to look like a modern-day Jesus.

"Here's Jesus," he announced, "who will read my story instead of me."

The voice taped for the reading was that of Alex's mother. He claims not to read much, but I don't believe him.

Assessment Paper

✓ I write for other people as well as myself. Sometimes I wish I didn't need to so I could do other things like write in both Spanish ✓ and English in one story; of course it wouldn't have any purpose except to be able to capture the right signification. Because I know that for too many words there is no appropriate translation even though they may mean the same ✓ thing in both English and Spanish. The problem is that there are completely different connotations applied to each. That probably also differs on the geographic location even in the same language. Anyhow. For the title of the story; "Villamiseria," whose closest translation is shantytown, but the two don't compare whatsoever, I titled it in Spanish. Thankfully it is not very hard to translate through common sense. I have thought a lot of writing stories and at times only run into Spanish words that would work in specific instances, but sorry, this paper has to do with attempting to change my writing and the question of whether I should shouldn't or what the hell.

? Why not?

"Villamiseria" was very different from at least the stories I usually write. I think it was easy to shift from my natural instincts of ✓ metafiction or whatever because of its narrator. It has an angrier ✓ ✓ tone and is I guess very sarcastic, something that is not as sharp in anything else I have done prior. I am very used to writing about things that are fantastical and outrageous, but I don't think I could do anything except write about that. At times I can't believe how things fall together for me.

I thought of this in about one hour after nearly a month of dry spell. I was in the car and for the longest time I knew I wanted to ✓ write a story that focused on the way that Americans live most of their lives through the television and how it modifies the way we view the real world. Ok, then I knew that it would have to be about someone that is talking to you and referring to many movies that you've never heard of (at first I was going to make believe generic names so the reader didn't have a clue in all this). Then I don't know how I thought of making the narratee a child from another country ✓ and he doesn't understand, but we as readers (and writer) do. We get it and the narratee doesn't. And sure, even now I think that was pretty smart. Then the other details got cleared up as things went along. The problem is ever being able to come up with anything as smart ever again. ✓

It was smart, Alex, but it was also a device, or conceit. Your other writing is just as good.

Another thing that since I wrote that story I had been reading a lot of Italo Calvino. And I don't know if i'm a goddamn thief or what, but the story that I wrote in one night about the swimming hole (even though many of the ideas were old from other unwritten stories) sounded a lot to me like an Italo Calvino story. But hey. That's ok. It also lacked much political motivation. It was just a nice story. Except that the story was called "the revolving door," it began as an improvised story in reaction to [another student's] story. It was going to be about how sexism gets sneakier but always exists. So I tried to do a bunch of stuff with images and stuff and when I began to write the story I couldn't think of anything to write about. But the story about a man leaving his wife, although it borders on issues of sexism, I think I found appealing because it is in a weird way reflective of the relationship of my mother and father. Anyhow, the story of kicking [the other student's] ass turned into a different story, with the same theme but too deep for [the other student].

Nope, just conversational. (You sounded like Calvino from the very beginning anyway—before you ever knew his work.)

Ok, my writing is changing, definitely, I will have to write more to know exactly where it is headed, but soon I will know.

I always love reading what you write about your writing.
Good thoughts.

Susannah LeBaron

What do I know about Susannah LeBaron? Originally trained as an opera singer back east, she ended up in California somehow, remajoring at CSUN in philosophy and/or religious studies after having given up singing because of the "career aspect" of it. Writing, it seems, was an afterthought, but since spring of 1996, she has been hooked. She is in her mid to late twenties, and much of her writing has to do with the Vietnam war, which haunts her in an odd way and which she vividly imagines. Susannah is interested in the philosophical underpinnings of narrative and writing, and is especially responsive to the ways in which critical theory opens up a useful dialogue around them. Susannah also believes writing is related to breathing.

Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

(That is also the title of a Joyce Carol Oates story.)

I want to have people understand what I write. I don't care if they understand it as I understand it, but I want them to have something. I want this in such an emotional, visceral way that I feel like a small child on the playground, wanting to be liked, wanting to be understood. It is like a kind of silence. And what I am thinking is that, if a person never simply speaks but speaks only in a context in which she feels privileged to speak, then there is something that I do not feel privileged to speak. And that is odd, because it *seems*, or I've been told, that all doors are open to me. It must be something inside. Another barrier of the psyche, another Yes, William, I am afraid.

Oddly enough, with me it was never about communicating.

It has come to this—I wish to communicate. I wish to be heard. I wish to move in the world. To *be* in the world. (It has taken me a long time to decide that.) And this means that I must inhabit my texts in a much more naked way. I have been hiding in *something*. I would like to know what that something is so that I can lay it to rest.

And it is not that I have anything to communicate. I simply have the desire for the activity itself. Something like that.

I am so tired of people saying, "I don't get it." Intelligent people whose opinions I value. What it comes down to is that I really really really want to learn about teaching my reader to read my texts. I do not want to write elitist texts. I do not want to lose my readers just because they have not studied narrative theory.

This, I think, is the key: In order to produce a successful text you must know how it stands in relation to the dominant convention. Maybe that's the key.

I am, at one level, worried that maybe this desire to be understood may head me down the wrong track. But I'm convinced that I can find a way to write how I want to write and still ease into a reader's enchantment zone. This will come, I fervently hope, from examining my texts and ideas for texts as they stand in relation to whatever it is out there that dominates reading conventions (so much is invisible); and by writing close to home. Cheryl Printup [another student] encouraged me to do that—write things that I know. But, see, having only recently decided to *be* in the world, I don't really know what makes up the "where" that I am, or the "where" from which I write. Everything I write about belongs to my parents and their generation. Vietnam and divorce. "Sutures" was a kind of breakthrough because I wrote about the pre-marriage pressure thing. That belongs to me. I know of sutured mine and not-mine together.

Sometimes in my head I hear stuff that's like a combination of Tim O'Brien and Bobbi Ann Mason. It feels very enchanting; details and philosophy; geography and reality flux; America at home and America abroad. But it blows through so fast that I can't keep pace with it. If I just keep listening hard, I think I'll be able to write like that. And I think I will find it very satisfying. Then maybe it won't matter what the readers think.

✓ God, it's just the same thing over and over and over again. What is your goal as a writer? To become more brave. To burrow, to listen. To get it. To initiate privilege for myself. It is frustrating that the brave of yesterday is not good enough to be the brave of today.

I have a fortune cookie taped to my computer. It says, "Listen often to the quiet voice within."

So, if the truth be told, where I am going and where I have been is the same place—the edge of *Where I Am* and *Where I Want To Be*. Same place, but the scenery keeps changing. ✓

Just keep writing, Susannah. These are the "right" concerns.

II Cartographies

7 Maps to Anywhere: Guided Writings, Some Introductory Remarks

It is never and always enough, this falling in and out of the memory of how I know the things I know about the way I work.

One thing, for example, I have come to understand is that when I write, language accumulates along a metonymic register and gathers a particular force or momentum that almost always culminates in something that feels, stunningly, true. I pause for an instant, savoring the moment, then, driven by a kind of perpetual curiosity about whatever in the world might be coming next, breathe deep and begin again, knowing that what seemed in the instant before both fixed and inevitable is left over now, more or less, as a remainder, as delicate as a whisper or wish. This is something I know about writing, and I also know that, for me, the same is true of teaching.

When I first began to sense that the only model I had ever known for the creative writing classroom was going to fail me as a teacher, I was angry: *Why hadn't anyone warned me? Why had all my teachers been men?*

What I wanted, I think now, was a quick fix—something, anything, to adjust the inequities of a system that worked, paradoxically, only for those who did not need it, those who already knew, as if by some genetic memory or code, how to write. What I began to see was that what worked in teaching "the best" writers was of little value to the rest.

I looked at my own classes and recognized that very split in them.

I considered my own history and development as a writer, for I did not begin with any notable "talent," but just an unseemly desire to write.

I thought about the years during which I apprenticed myself to one discipline of language after another, years of steady progress during which I learned most of the regular wisdom: work hard and steel myself against rejection. How I came through this process to discover such eternal verities as sentences and structure is a story much too long for the present moment, but finally it did seem to me not that the process itself had taken too long (for every arc of learning writing is its own wholly necessary path), but that at the very least I might begin to frame some way of sharing what I'd learned and how I'd learned it with students.

I once heard the musician and writer Al Young read and talk about writing. He's a large man, the kind who fills a room, dark, with going-white hair and a deep voice still primed for jazz. As he described his early life, he focused on music as a center of community and culture in the small town where he grew up, and everyone in his family played something. Also, writing. One of his grade school teachers had made them memorize a poem a week, and they had hated her for it—all those poems! But during that year of memorization Young had somehow got it in his head that learning to write poetry was just like learning to play trumpet, with a book of exercises and daily practice.

Young talked with some nostalgia about his finger exercises, and then poems. He said he hadn't seen how it should be any different: your musical scales, your poetic forms, the practice of doing things over and over until you got them right. How far, he said, we had come since then from this model of learning poem writing. He seemed to suggest we knew better now. Then he shook his head and laughed.

"Turns out," he said, "I was probably right."

So I begin, in reinventing my teaching, with guided writing, which I imagine as a formal structure (somewhat like a finger exercise) within which the "natural" drive toward "self-expression" might be redirected through discipline and structure. To the novice, it's a mystifying business, this notion that language is as much an object as the texts it makes, both the material and medium with which we work, like sound in music, or charcoal in drawing, or the well-trained body in dance. No one has to tell other artists that they must learn their media, including its material and complex rules of composition, but the double-edgedness of language is confounding. We think we are *saying* something when we write, as indeed we are, but we are also *making* something, as material and wrought as any sculpture. Language slips us up because it seems transparent—*seems*, not *is*. Story, too, seems like *what* happens, but of course it is just as much *how*. For writing does not come to us as if out of thin air, and we must remember to say so.

Finger exercises for the writer. Work in distinguishing concepts of blue.

All the poets I have ever known have known more about language in a single line than many fiction writers in an entire novel.

As a girl, I played oboe, a difficult instrument I was never that good at.

Eyes, lips, fingers, words.

If poets have their forms, what do we have, those of us who write prose? If I ask you, what's a sentence, can you imagine it independent of its meaning, as, first of all, a sound?

So yes, we have our work cut out for us: beginning with breaking whole lifetimes of fixed writing habits, and ending—I'm not sure it ever ends.

The principle of guided writing is both straightforward and not, and I suppose its mystery is no different from that which inheres in writing itself, from that, for example, which distinguishes a Shakespearean sonnet from a Berryman dream song, and who can say? I like to think an exercise can chart the difference, take us back through where we've been, and lead the novice writer through new experiences in language, narrative, expression, and form. The principle of guided writing is just that. It is experiment, innovation, curiosity, possibility, risk. Guided writing enables the student to write what he or she does not know how to write, but safely, in the pause between long-since-familiar breath units, the dance of the writeable text.

Looking back, I cannot remember ever having seen a writing exercise until I started inventing them for class. I do remember being asked, from time to time, to "write a character sketch," or "describe a setting," just as I remember the little camera in my head that started rolling as I struggled to describe what I was seeing. And because I came to know how bad this is for writing, I initially avoided prescription, like many writing teachers, preferring instead to set my students loose with their blank pages, just to see what they could do.

But while a blank page can sometimes be inviting, it is, just as often, overwhelming. By replicating the process of successful writing, an exercise can circumvent this frustration. Thus, the point is not to produce a particular kind of writing or effect, but rather a particular kind of writing experience within which writers might jump-start themselves into unfamiliar spaces where writing may break open for them in new ways. It is not about a writing product but a writing logic, and it is never about already knowing.

Consider the work of physicist Andrew Strominger, who recently determined that black holes and strings are in fact different aspects of the same thing. Strominger does it with numbers, holds together in the same space of thinking the unimaginable vastness of black holes with the unimaginable smallness of strings—tiny loops (one hundred billion

billion times smaller than a proton) that vibrate in eleven dimensions. Numbers—the mathematical beauty and symmetries of which have at last enabled physicists to resolve the vexed contradictions between gravity (which rules the stars and planets) and quantum mechanics (which rules molecules and atoms), contradictions which, until now, have rendered the whole universe unstable and absurd.

When interviewed for the *Los Angeles Times*, Strominger said, "Looking back, I have the sensation that I'm not smart enough to figure all that out. . . . It was more like the theory explained itself to us. The theory is much cleverer than the people trying to discover it. So instead of attacking it, you listen for clues. The people who do the best work are the listeners."

By George, I want to say, *I recognize that feeling*. Don't you?

Language, too, is much cleverer than we are, and we are better writers when we learn to allow that it is so. Inventing an exercise, just like doing one, is about listening hard for the clues. When we pick up on them, we pick up the beat, and our job as teachers is not just to pass on the beat, but to pass on, as well, how we picked it up. For this, we return to our listening.

In Paris in the fifties a group of artists and writers known as the Situationalists developed an art form they called a *Des Rives*. Literally, this means "a wandering," from the French word for river, but it is easily confused with *reves*, for dreams. Similarly, in English, change the *a* to an *o* in *wandering* and you have *wondering*, which is also what this is. The idea was literally to wander around Paris, stopping wherever the feeling might strike them, to write or draw or record observations. It was a form of "mapping" the city, as it had never before been mapped, impressionistic and revealing of the state of wonder derived from strict attention to the world.

Writing an exercise is a little like that: a map of the true space of writing.

An exercise can be as elaborate or simple as: write yourself into the blank space of this text, translate (English to English) something you've written, replace each word in a poem with its opposite, borrow a discourse, design a system to randomly generate words and use them, experiment with gaps and disruptions, cross genres, collaborate, make a hybrid text fusing creative and critical discourse, imagine a new scene of writing, and so on. It can be spontaneous—something you throw out in class, like: write for ten minutes, using the first letters of your name to start each sentence. Or it can be, itself, a piece of writing, conversational, introspective, explicit. For me, it is important not just to tell the writers what they are being asked to do, but also why, and how, and what they may expect of the experience.

All the rest, beyond that, is writing.

I want to describe four kinds of guided writing here, each appropriate for all levels of writing instruction, and none fixed or absolute. Rather, I have chosen them because each, in its own way, has been significant in my life as a teacher. Like the play of language itself, each represents various concepts of "play" in writing. Each maps a separate way of writing and provides yet another point of entry or place to begin, as always, again.

8 Map 1: Finger Exercises (Not for Trumpet)

In all of the lives of our writing, we look back at various times and mark watershed points, like red Xs on a map, places and times and arcs of experience where we could say, in retrospect: *here writing began, no, here, no—here.* Each of these has value, and provides the base upon which to add the next stage of development. These first two exercises are not my most inventive, but they are my oldest and I have used them longest and am fond of them. This is where I started out, my first clumsy attempts as an exercise thinker, and they mark, in a curious way, the coming together of one of my own watershed points as a writer.

Previously, I have described Richard Hugo's concepts of "triggering subject" and "personal" language, and as I think about them now I am torn between two competing pedagogic and writing impulses. The first is to move ever closer to language-based teaching strategies, as if the writer, in the writing moment, literally slipped inside of discourse and disappeared. And the second is to return in all sincerity and earnestness to the writer herself, or himself, saying: *tell me where this writing comes from, what it means to you.* If we don't *care* it doesn't count (I believe this), and if it doesn't count, it's not worth writing.

Both, then—language *and* triggering subject—come together to make writing happen, though in any given moment we may pay greater or lesser attention to one or the other. We are listening to the words we are writing, their palpable materiality and absolute imperative, and at the same time we are hearing not just where we have been but where we must go next, what the words themselves (this very language) can tell us about what must follow. It is a dance, a complicated balance and an act of faith, by which, in the stillness between heartbeats, writing happens.

Many years ago, when I was first learning writing and still under the influence of minimalism, I heard of a form, then popular in Africa, called the "page novel." As I thought about how this might be different from other short-short forms—the "minute story," for example, or the "prose poem"—it seemed that prose poems might be structured around image, minute stories around particular incidents, and page novels, larger chronicles, whole sweeping sequences of events. Determined to take this logic as far as I could, I resolved to write a novel that chronicled the history of my family in a single page. I was convinced that, with diligence, this would be possible.

I was diligent. I wrote daily. I turned every sentence over countless times. I worked at this project six months. And in the end, I failed. But during those six months I had pushed the sentence envelope as far as I could, stretching and twisting and looping its shape to catch, as if on air, what Robert Frost has called a "sentence-sound." And what happened was: I fell in love. I fell in love with sentences, and learned to find a space inside their coming into being that would count, in the end, as good listening. As committed as I was to my family history, I had come, through this discipline, to "transfer my allegiance" to language. If this was writing, count me in—over and over again.

When I wrote the pair of writing exercises below, I was not thinking of the contradictory link between subject and language as an origin of writing—how, without the subject, there would be no writing, but how the writing depends on setting the subject aside, as if to protect it from the tremendous assault of the writer's most earnest intentions. I wrote them, more or less, as an act of desperation. I needed to find some way to jolt students into writing.

My goal in the first exercise was to create a context within which writing might open up. Based on the premise that what you don't know about what you are writing is a great deal more interesting than what you do know, I also wanted to exhaust intentionality through overloading. My goal in the second, paradoxically, was to place as many restrictions on language as I could, so as to limit the interference of intention. While the two exercises are discrete, I now frequently use them as a pair, because they proceed from two different writing processes that can be complementary. Somewhere in the space between the two exercises, and sometimes in one, and sometimes in the other, and for some students, writing happens. Below, along with each exercise, I am including a student sample by Rebbecca Brown, and I am using her entire work for each exercise to demonstrate how they may work together. At the end of this section, I am including additional excerpts from other student samples to demonstrate, in addition, the range of work these assignments may produce.

Exercise 1: Beyond the End of Writing

> It is the childish delight at combinatorial play that induces the painter to try out patterns of lines and colors and the poet to at-

> tempt combinations of words. At a certain stage something clicks, and one of the combinations obtained by its own mechanisms, independently of any search for meaning or effect on some other level, takes on an unexpected sense or produces an unforeseen effect that consciousness could not have achieved intentionally.
>
> Italo Calvino, "Cybernetics and Ghosts"

In his book *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo argues that those of us who write have somewhere deep inside a subject that "triggers" writing. We know this is true because, to varying extents, we feel impassioned and driven in our writing, which frequently seems to grow, like gods out of the weather, from the same material, or problem, or idea, or passion. Hugo's own triggering subject had always been, he said, a small town in the American West that had seen better days and was now in decline.

Perhaps you know the kind of town he means. You're driving for hours across the vast emptiness we know as the American West. Maybe you see mountains in the distance; maybe you are moving away, toward the flat reaches of plains. You're going fast, and inside you have that feeling between awe and despair, something in this endless stretch of land you recognize but cannot name, something very close to longing. Then, out of nowhere, a town rears up, replete with its own mute history and loss. You want to stop. You want to have a hamburger and cherry coke at the cafe. You want, for an instant, to disappear into whatever has held this place together through its long and complex history, but you know, too, you're an outsider, and should pass.

Whenever he saw such a town, Hugo said, it triggered whatever it was inside him that wanted to write a poem. But, he continued, for each piece of writing there are always two subjects: the triggering subject, the one that "sparked" the writing; and the subject that is discovered in the act of writing the piece. And this, he says, occurs during a process in which the writer transfers allegiance from the first, the triggering subject, to the words, the language it triggers. For in addition to our triggering subject, Hugo says we all have inside us a unique and private language. This is not to be confused with any of the models of high literary writing we may aspire to. This language is our own and must be distinguished from all the different kinds of language we think we're supposed to sound like. Learning to write, Hugo says, is a process of learning to sound like ourselves, in which we must commit our most passionate attention to the language itself inside us, and not to the subject that sparks it. This is what he calls "writing off the subject."

And here's the most curious thing, a certain alchemy of writing: the more you pay attention to working the actual words in your head instead of what you think you want them to mean, the closer they will come to your intention.

The title essay of Hugo's book includes the following:

> Assumptions lie behind the work of all writers. The writer is unaware of most of them, and many of them are weird. Often the weirder the better. Words love the ridiculous areas of our mind. But silly or solid, assumptions are necessary elements in a successful base of writing operations. It is important that a [writer] not question his or her assumptions, at least not in the middle of composition. Finish the [writing] first, then worry, if you have to, about being right or sane.
>
> Whenever I see a town that triggers whatever it is inside me that wants to write a poem, I assume at least one of the following:
>
> The name of the town is significant and must appear in the title.
>
> The inhabitants are natives and have lived there forever. I am the only stranger.
>
> I have lived there all my life and should have left long ago but couldn't. . . .
>
> The churches are always empty.
>
> A few people attend church but the sermons are boring.
>
> Everybody goes to church and the sermons are inspiring. . . .
>
> I am an eleven-year-old orphan. . . .
>
> The grain elevator is silver. . . .
>
> Dogs roam the streets. . . .
>
> Wind blows hard through the town except on Sunday afternoons a little before noon when the air becomes still.
>
> The air is still all week except on Sunday afternoons when the wind blows.
>
> Once in awhile an unlikely animal wanders into town, a bear or cougar or wolverine. . . .
>
> There is always a body of water, a sea just out of sight beyond the hill or a river running through the town. Outside of town a few miles is a lake that has been the scene of both romance and violence. . . .

The list continues, by turns whimsical, sad, fantastic, realistic, twisted. As in many useful models for writing, it requires that we hold contradictory tenets to be simultaneously true and embrace a both/and vision, the uncommon logic on which writing depends.

Elsewhere, Hugo offers additional good advice (4–8). For example:

> 1. [Don't] push language around to make it accommodate what [you have] already conceived to be the truth. ["How can I know what I mean until I see what I've said?"—E. M. Forster]
>
> 2. Talk about something else before you run out of things to say about [your triggering subject]. Don't be afraid to jump ahead.
>
> 3. Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together. [Use words for the sake of sound.]
>
> 4. The initiating subject should trigger the imagination as well as the [writing].
>
> 5. The [writer's] relation to the triggering subject should never be as strong as (must be weaker than) [her/]his relation to [her/]his words. The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words.
>
> 6. The [writing] grows from an experience, either real or imagined.
>
> 7. Seldom [find] room for explanations, motivations, or reason. [Or, as François Camoin says, "Never apologize, never explain."]
>
> 8. Think small.
>
> And here's one from François and me: *Don't think.*

This exercise asks you to play with the concept of language and subject in a process that Hugo calls writing "off the subject."

Begin by naming your triggering subject. This does not have to be one single thing that always drives your writing, because such a thing changes over time to reflect your changing interests and self, and also may take years to discover. But whatever you choose as your subject, it must be important to you in some fundamental way. You have to care about it deeply. It has to *count.*

Your first question here is: *What is it?*

Boys at play on a field, the river that ran by your childhood house, your eccentric Aunt Trudy, volcanoes. Soccer. Botany. What you know how to build. A master family myth.

Once you have named your "triggering subject" write a list of ten "assumptions" you might make about this subject. Your assumptions may be a sentence, several sentences, a small paragraph, but they should be characterized by what Cynthia Ozick calls "the recognition of the particular"—detail, minute observation, whatever distinguishes your observation ("assumption") from what anyone else might say about the same thing.

Number your first ten assumptions.

Read them out loud.

Think about them.

Now, use each of your first ten assumptions as a new "triggering subject"—one more particularized than the one you began with, but still related—and start over again, ten new assumptions, each containing something specific—a color, a named scent, material objects.

That makes one hundred and ten assumptions. If you have time, write one assumption off each of those, doubling your total, and if that doesn't get you "writing off the subject," go back and start over again.

Variations:

1: Go back over the list of assumptions you made, and without changing any of them, write a story by linking selected assumptions together in a different order.

2: Choose ten of your favorite assumptions and write a story in ten parts, each beginning with one of the assumptions.

3: Write a poem with words or phrases from your assumptions.

4: Choose your favorite assumptions, as many as you like, and expand them each into a paragraph, a page, a story.

5: Begin again with an entirely new subject—or the same one.

Note: This exercise will seem, at times, extreme. You will want to stop. You may begin to doubt, or curse, or sweat the proverbial writerly blood. But keep going, because if you persevere beyond the end of writing, you will reach a second wind where writing may begin again, and then again again.

Do it all.

Student Sample*

The Assumptions
of Rebbecca Brown

1. He wears a long black jacket that is shiny with raindrops or sweat.
2. He is not a he.
3. Underneath her fingernails colors flow over each other in waves and make the sound of wind rustling leaves.

---

* Rebecca preferred not to name her triggering subject.

4. The man who lies in the box is sleeping and bloated. There is something still under his eyes. He is my uncle with the broken ear and small squeaky dog named Trix.
5. Air has no weight or blood to fix it firmly.
6. The captain did not lose his ring over the rim of the rocking sea. It was given to the water so a piece of his fixed place would sink and carry his breath to the bottom of loving sand.
7. There are small crooked whispers that tickle and find a nice spot under eyelids to flutter and feel soft.
8. She can not sleep because her eyes are filled with too much light.
9. People go there in glimmering golden autos with gold bracelets gold smiles gold everywhere. Even their hair smells golden.
10. To leave is to become lost.

He wears a long black jacket that is shiny with raindrops or sweat.

1. The train was too much trouble so he walked with his black weight to a new town too tiny to notice.
2. It rains every other hour under the trees. The heat sweats them out of pressure and their water falls on the sleeping man.
3. The jacket was bought from a sad long lady with weeds and licorice leaning out of her pockets. Her teeth were gray and sticky.
4. He had an uncanny ability to sweat, even while he was still.
5. The sun in Mexico swelters.
6. The rain in Seattle soaks.
7. His galoshes squeak like the mouse he found in his cabinet.
8. He whistles while walking on the dark melting snow.
9. The lining is red with white dots and is ripped near his fragile thin wrists.

He is not a he.

1. He only looks like a he who is tired of working under the cooked sun.
2. He was a she so he can't really be a she as she had the he installed permanently and discreetly.

3. He is a cat and it is wrong to call him "he" when he meows instead of saying "me."
4. He is not and she is not.
5. He is my mother who makes malt-o-meal and sews my fraying mittens.
6. He lies all the time and changes his sex like his socks.
7. He is a floating particle above my head now, and has no eyes or hair.
8. He is music when he sings. He loses himself, his he, and becomes something beautiful, like clean air or clear water.
9. He talks to his many selves who are they, all one. He she we they one two three he four she three we.
10. He is a sad sorry frightened thing with pointy ears that hear everything dissolve into hums.

Underneath her fingernails colors flow over each other in waves and make the sound of wind rustling leaves.

1. When she is typing, her nails click and spark over keys. She likes to type in the dark when it is quiet so that the sound shines.
2. The leaves that fell from the tree outside of her window were brown and orange. Like all trees. Like all girls she was not impressed by brown and orange. She liked red and green and yellow, the colors of growing things.
3. She painted. She liked the sound of brushes against the canvas. She liked the look of color when it accidentally got stuck underneath her nails. She waited. She painted. She waited.
4. When it was quiet, she could hear the colors shifting under her long, delicate nails. She had been painting the underside of her nails since she was thirteen and her mother bought her her first jar of polish. It was "candy cane red." When she first painted her nails, it was on the outside, and a bad thing had happened. She never wanted to be attractive again. Candy canes are too bright. She must paint the underside so that the beauty and brightness are dulled and opaque.
5. When she sees her nails underneath the microscope she can imagine the sound of the leaves that rustled when she was a little girl looking for bugs to dissect.
6. Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhb. Shhhhhhhhhhbhhhh Shhhhhhhhh hhhhh.

7. There is red there and blue. Green and purple. Hardly do they mix together. The color brown is so dull and silent.
8. She digs all day. The colored sand gets stuck and she can not trim her nails fast enough to fight it. The emery boards wear down too quick. Maybe it's because she drinks so much milk. Maybe it's because she works by the ocean. Maybe it is because of her genes. The colors came from sand. The growth came from her mother.
9. Wait a minute, she thought, can colors make sound? Red seemed to be so loud. Or was that just a cliche that she had heard so many times that it became true? She wasn't sure, but the waves did seem to rustle.
10. How can this be possible?

The man who lies in the box is sleeping and bloated. There is something still under his eyes. He is my uncle with the broken ear and small squeaky dog named Trix.

1. The dog is a small dog and very old. She jumps a lot despite her age, unlike my uncle, who can not jump any longer.
2. I am not sure if he is my uncle, or my great-uncle, or my god-uncle or my mother's uncle, or what the difference is or if it matters. I am four and at my first funeral.
3. I am not sure why my mother has told me that he is sleeping. I don't think he will ever wake up.
4. I hate that dog. She is mangy and has fleas. I have to sleep on the floor and she jumps on me.
5. I love Trix. Trix can spin around by holding a sock in her mouth while I turn round and round. I mop the floor with her fur.
6. I have only met him twice, yet I still call him my uncle. I don't understand this. My friend Jim is more my uncle than the man sleeping in the box. Why isn't Jim my uncle?
7. I want to leave the space behind the curtain and walk around the pretty church. My tights itch. There are people crying. I want to find Trix. I want to jump and play.
8. When he was fourteen, somebody shot him in the ear, nearly missing his head. He was playing in a field that did not belong to him. He was picking corn that was not his. He was poor and hungry and just wanted something to eat.
9. I wonder why he can't get up. I wonder why he looks so fat. Did he eat too much? His skin sags and he is old. He

looks like the bottom of my feet after I run on the sidewalk all day without socks.

10. Trix is a huge dog and has a small name. Trix are colorful and tasty, and just for kids. Trix the dog, however, is huge and slow. He lumbers around the dusty yard looking for the coolest place to lay all day. Sometimes he growls but mostly he eats.

Air has no weight or blood to fix it firmly.

1. I have blood that places me in a position I can not escape. I can never deny my blood, or my breath, or my mother, or my father.
2. It hangs around for awhile, and when it gets bored, it can leave if it wants to. Maybe it was never there in the first place. But we have to breathe something.
3. I would like to be air someday, instead of dust.
4. Air has pressure. Pressure does not weigh, it crushes and pushes. Not weight. Pressure.
5. Air has nothing else but air and can not be air unless we say it is air and air is not air for everyone because air has different names. If we are alive we breathe air. Or we don't. We breathe another word. And in that case, we are not breathing. We are other-wording.
6. It is made up of atoms, or so I have heard. I don't believe in these so-called "atoms." My brother's name is Adam. He lies all the time and I don't believe him.
7. It floats.
8. I once tried to fix a butterfly. Pin its position so that it couldn't fly in the air anymore. It was blue and beautiful and as big as my fist. It did not belong in the desert, but it was there. It landed on my backpack and let me pet it. It stayed long enough for me to draw it from 3 angles. The hair on its back was soft. It rested. I touched it. I could not believe that something so beautiful had arrived by air. I wanted to kill it so that people would believe me when I told this story. I wanted to put it under glass, preserve it. Claim it. Own it. For a minute it was mine.
9. Air can have blood in it, or weight in it, but not of it. Nothing of it, this air. It's just there. Air air, poor air. Air air, full rich air.
10. The air in Los Angeles is heavy. The air there has weight. It is filled with gray particles that clot out the sun. Like the artery in my grandfather's heart that cloned out air to lungs.

The captain did not lose his ring over the rim of the rocking sea. It was given to the water so a piece of his fixed place would sink and carry his breath to the bottom of loving sand.

1. He knew that a piece of him would always be somewhere in the world, even if he wasn't.
2. He told his wife that he had lost it. He knew that if he took it into the earth with him, it would disappear. He knew how safe the sea was.
3. He threw it over the railing on his last sail. He was sick of steering cruise ships. He hated bermuda shorts and suntan lotion. He wanted to live where it was cold. Maybe Alaska. Maybe not.
4. He knew sand loved him because it always stuck until he brushed or washed it away.
5. His father had given him the ring on the day he left his country.
6. The fish underneath the waves smiled when they saw his shining gift. One tried to swallow the sinking metal, but her mouth was too small. It truly belonged to the floor.
7. He threw it behind his back without looking. He heard the slight splash and knew it was safe.
8. Sand loving of bottom to breath carry and sink would place his piece so water the given was it. Sea rocking the rim over ring his lose did captain.
9. Why would the water take it? Was it as greedy as everyone else? Why didn't it spit it back up to him, where it belonged?
10. From the sea back to the sea in one quick swing.

There are small crooked whispers that tickle and find a nice spot under eyelids to flutter and feel soft.

1. Fluttering eyelids like wings when they wink.
2. I have no idea what this means.
3. It has to do with dreaming.
4. When he dreams and I stare at his eyes, I can tell he is somewhere nice. His breathing is smooth and his hands are relaxed.
5. When that bitch was talking about me like that, I swear it went straight to my eyes. Every time I saw her after, she looked a little green.

6. I flutter like eyelids when I breathe. I can not stand still anymore. I don't know when it happened, when movement became inevitable and tranquility a dream.
7. Whispers have names too, like Harold, Maven, Dillon and Melissa.
8. Soft like a cotton blanket on bare arms. The blanket she had as a baby was blue with little fluffed up sheep. Sheep that made her sleep when the sun was down and low below a wood rimmed window.
9. Whispers can be crooked when whisked through liar's lips. Once, he told me he loved the softness of my eyes. Then, he took them away from me so that I could not see.
10. When she told me those sullen things, it made me laugh and dream odd dreams. I liked the sound of her shaken. She sounded so silly. And she was so sad. I couldn't help but laugh.

She can not sleep because her eyes are filled with too much light.

1. She had not slept in four days. Her eyes had barely closed for a few moments, and she knew that she somehow she had ingested all of the light, like a sickly bright food.
2. The sun had burnt her eyes and now she could only see the sun, flickering on all images like a bright silent camera.
3. The photographers were at her face all day. "Smile," "frown," "look sexy" they said. They told her to tilt her head, relax her cheeks, lift her face, cross her arms. She was tired. Her face was plastered everywhere. How exhausting.
4. Through the microscope she noticed that the bacteria were multiplying too fast. Usually they stayed dormant under normal conditions. The light did something to them, made them quicken, hurried them to live. She understood their motivation. Minutes of brightness made her hasty, made her swift. She had to finish the project by March. They lived and died too quickly for her hands to tell their stories.
5. She was sick of staying awake. It was in front of her, so she sniffed it. She had had enough. When would she be able to sleep? Her brain moved too fast for sleep to catch it.
6. She could sleep all day in the darkness under the sun, but if it filled her, she couldn't even blink it away.

7. The drive to Juarez was long and hot. The sun beamed at her through the glass of her windshield and the glass of her glasses. There was always too much sun. When she arrived, she told the man at the hotel counter that all she wanted was some water and a bed. She was shown to her room by a short, almond colored man. She sprawled out on the lumpy twin. Too much light. She could not sleep. How can anyone get anything done in this sun?
8. Love made her restless. Love? What is love? Love is light? It sounded so religious, and everyone knew there was no such thing.
9. The curtains had a thousand tiny holes that created bright speckled spotches on the underside of her eyes. She'd have to mend them someday, she thought. When she could buy some thread. And fabric. She loved fabric, especially rough, scratchy fabric, like burlap or denim.
10. The optometrist had told her that her pupils were two different sizes. "This is from either brain damage, head trauma, or, quite possibly, just because of genetics," he said. Great. Brain damage. Of course that was it. Or trauma. There is no way that she, of all people, was okay. Perfectly healthy. What a joke. Impossible.

People go there in glimmering golden autos with gold bracelets gold smiles gold everywhere. Even their hair smells golden.

1. The lines outside are long. You have to be golden to get in. You have to know someone golden to get in. You can hear the golden music sleeking through the gold windows. It's probably the golden band. A gold band of golden musicians play there every golden night.
2. People plastered on the golden sand, reclining. There is nothing to do but relax and be aware of how shining and perfect they are.
3. They have rings on their fingers and furs on their backs. They have leather on their seats and diamonds dripping from their ears. Their breath is like ice. They heave all things beautiful on their backs and ride out under the sun like the day was born to only them.
4. The Festival of Gold-Diggers was now a bi-annual event, bringing the likes of June Chantwater and Stephie Slippenstile. June and Stephie had both been married to the same man, Glen Gillo (of the Irvine Gillo's) but had not succeeded in stripping him of his modest fortune. For this they were bound like sisters, and planned to host this

year's speech on (Day 2, LakeSide Room, 3rd Floor, 2:00 p.m.) "Failed Digs, Don't Throw Away That Pick."

5. The "Golden God" reunion tour was in full effect. People from all over the country came to drop LSD and paint their bodies the color of the sun. It had been years since Golden God had played at a venue this large. Now was the time for them to shine. HaHaHa. Shine . . .
6. Lilly Littlefield was there. Becka Breesly was there. And so was that damned anchor-bitch Tess Tlicklop.
7. You could smell it from as far away as Tillton. Even though Tillton was full of oil-rigs and pig farms, the residents could smell it sure as day every third Wednesday of March.
8. They each had at least two boyfriends, and an uncountable amount of husbands. Polygamy was legalized in Tennessee sometime in the early twenties, and successful women had flocked from all over the country to grin and bear humidity and hordes of desperate suitors. If they bought an ATC for one husband, the law stated that they had to buy every other husband a gift of equal value. That is why most of them preferred boyfriends to the bothersome and nagging husbands.
9. They arrive in the morning, and leave with the sun three shiny days later. They do not sleep. Instead they smile, and lazily sip whatever is stuck into their palms.
10. When the gold was taken and distributed among the people, things got a little out of control. The people realized that it had no value. They started to make the silliest thing out of the gold bars that arrived religiously every Monday. Golden egg-beaters, golden staples, gold-threaded bath towels. Anything they could make with the gold would be made, including gold toasters.

To leave is to become lost.

1. Without them, you are not sure who you are anymore. They name you, give you your occupation, tell you where you will live. Once you walk beyond the boundaries, you have nothing. Not even the power to create yourself.
2. When he left the church, he was not sure who he was anymore. They had told him who his friends were, who he would date, what he would do with his time. Once he walked away, he had nothing. Not even the power to create himself. After many years, he remembered his name.

3. The walls were high and guarded. No one was sure what was beyond them. They knew of nothing other than the inside. The outside was small and had no place for people from inside the walls.
4. Once you leave your credit cards, your identification, your website behind, you have no you anymore. But this is impossible. There is no such thing as anonymity. You can't even go on vacation anymore without cameras or cash. You'd be lost.
5. Outside of the capsule, the water surrounds you like darkness that's never seen light. You must rely on the light from the fish that have learned to live without light. They have never seen the sun, and don't need it. You, however, were born under it, and are lost without it underwater.
6. My mother would always tell me this when I used the word, "someday."
7. Leaving entails walking in circles, looking.
8. Especially if you don't have a map. One look at the city from above and you can see that there are no organized ways out. You've got to leave in style. Take a balloon, maybe. Or jump. It doesn't matter. You won't get out without getting lost.
9. He left ten years ago and was not heard from again.
10. Leave lightly in the morning, when the dew begins to drip, and you will get away without losing.

Exercise 2: Sentence Sounds

> What the writer must do, of course, is not only render the scene, but render the scene inseparable from its language, so that if the idea . . . is taken from the situation, like a heart from its body, both die.
>
> William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*

When I was a novice teacher just finding my way around enrollment sheets and grading policies, a famous poet advised me to put as many obstacles as possible between the motivations of student writers and their writing. This was about more than just "not thinking." This was about deliberately confounding intention, making noise, and getting in the way. The poet was in earnest. He is very tall, and he gestured broadly with large hands above my head.

"Make it impossible," he said. "It's all words anyway," I think he said.

We don't argue with this principle when we think of the composer, who works notes and instruments and sound, or the artist, who uses paint and other palpable materials to create a visual, physical space. Even the dancer's body is a medium of shape and movement. All arts evoke profound emotion and intellectual response, but we also know that this response would escape us if the composer were careless, or the artist imprecise, or the dancer weak, her body flagging.

Words are confusing as a medium because they *mean* things. But they are not transparent, and they are first of all an object. Writing, too, is never only what it is about, but rather what it *is*—the thing on the page, the *made* thing.

Thus, we may train ourselves, like the dancer or musician, to give ourselves over to our material—the word, or the sentence itself, and all its material aspects, the sound and shape of it in our ear and mouth as well as on the page, its palpable body and form. We may experience bliss even as, paradoxically, meaning shines through.

This exercise is designed to keep you writing, in Richard Hugo's terms, "off the subject." It assumes that: (1) your subject will prevail only if it is somehow protected from earnest intentions, and (2) the smallest unit of particular attention in fiction is the sentence. It is adapted, in part, from a similar writing exercise developed by Ken Waldman.

Return to the above exercise, "Beyond the End of Writing," and choose one of your assumptions as an opening sentence. Then proceed through the following directions. As you follow them, work to develop a narrative sequence; each sentence should somehow connect to, or lead to, the next, building a story. But don't think it through. Concentrate, instead, on the directions as you find them, which you should follow exactly and in order.

Be prepared to be surprised by the story that emerges, as it will.

Note: You may need a dictionary and a book of English usage.

The Directions:

1. Begin with the "assumption" you have chosen. Write it down.
2. Write a sentence that repeats one word, but no more than one, from this sentence.
3. Write a sentence that repeats one word, but no more than one, from your second sentence.
4. Write a sentence that includes: a place name.
5. a dash.

6. a color and a name.
7. more than thirty words.
8. less than ten words.
9. a colon.
10. a part of the body.
11. the conditional tense.
12. a first person pronoun.
13. an interruptive clause.
14. quotation marks.
15. two interruptive clauses.
16. three articles of clothing.
17. a simile.
18. any form of the word "try."
19. a geographical formation.
20. italics.
21. a dictionary definition.
22. a metaphor.
23. a parallel structure.
24. exactly twenty-nine words.
25. exactly seventeen words.
26. exactly five words.
27. a comma and a semicolon.
28. the same words four times.
29. a second-person pronoun.
30. a question mark.
31. reference to a past event.
32. a familial relationship.
33. parentheses.
34. alliteration.
35. a paradox.
36. exactly ten words.
37. exactly twenty words.
38. exactly thirty words.
39. exactly forty words.
40. exactly fifty words.
41. a comma splice.
42. two dashes.
43. something seen.
44. something tasted.
45. something heard.
46. something touched.

47. something smelled.
48. an equivocation.
49. the future tense.
50. the present tense.

Write a sentence, a paragraph, a page, and finish.

Remember that though the rules are minimums, they are absolute: don't fudge.

Student Sample

Pinning Wind, by Rebbecca Brown

I once tried to fix a butterfly. The butterfly landed on my backpack in the middle of the night. Or maybe it was a moth because it was night and moths like heat and light. I was in Palmdale, in the middle of the desert in the middle of the night. Palmdale is hot and windy and filled with dry things—yucca, agave, joshua tree. I do not believe that the butterfly moth came from Mojave because it was bright blue and silver and as big as my fist. Mojave had little people in its cracked and warm belly until the early eighties when dryness became a nice space to build houses and families, fences, and schools where kids went to learn about moths and other beautiful, lost, ancient old things. Like Egypt. In Egypt, people lived in a hot and dry stomach like Mojave's, fixing time to walls: I have not told lies, I have not done wrong.

The butterfly sat on my backpack and let me rub its soft hairy back with my finger. I thought it would fly away if I touched and pet and put my flesh on its insect skin. I thought it would twitch and skitter from my warmth, but it was still. Sometimes, slowly and gracefully, it would sway its wings back and forth in between touches. "I wonder why you don't fly," I whispered where its ear would be, to see if my voice would send it into flight. The butterfly seemed to understand, secretly, what I was saying, softly, to its finely furred self.

I knew the butterfly would not stay all night, so I looked for something (a sock, a scarf, a shoe) to catch it in. I wanted to keep it forever close to my fingers, like a beautiful blue ring I could wear and show to whomever I wanted whenever. I tried to find something, anything, a pin, needle. If it wasn't going to fly and flow away from me, ancient fluid river, I could keep it near me until blue and silver yellowed, like papyrus. I have not done wrong.

A butterfly is any of numerous slender-bodied diurnal insects with broad, often brightly colored wings, or a feeling of hollowness or queasiness caused by emotional or nervous tension. I was a butterfly. I was a butterfly because I often had brightly colored things, felt hollow and was nervous when thinking and wanting pinned wings.

I lived in a dry desert place and did not see creatures so beautiful and blue because the land there is brown and in shades of tan like papyrus. I did not want the creature to leave and fly through a place without blue or silver. It could live with me. In my house with my things and my colors; the blue curtains, the silver bed frame, the yellowed walls and tan tables. I knew no one would believe me, no one would believe I touched it, no one would believe it came from a dry, colorless night, no one would believe it was mine.

She sat there silently on my backpack, her wings waving when hot wind blew, but not enough to lift her away. Why wouldn't she fly? It was love, knowing hurt but staying still, pinned like insect jesus. I thought of my mother's hands, still and steady, threading needles. I thought of silver pins and needles, needles, pins and blue and blue blood and papyrus yellow and old things and keeping wings and *I have not told lies, I have not done wrong.* For five minutes that flowed forever like fifty, I fought pins, I fought needles, I fought.

I thought that by killing this beautiful creature, I would set it free. I didn't think about the absence of color or flight. I would build a tiny wooden box for it, and paint the inside bright, keep it away from the sun. I would spread its wings as far as they could go so that it would always look like a scattering sky over a color-filled valley of greens and reds. I would keep it in my pocket, or make a special hole for it in somewhere within my yellow walls so that it would be discovered in all of its large blue perfection by a person who could read hieroglyphics. I'd carry it in its painted safe box so I could show the people in Mojave's belly that beautiful things could arrive by air and that beauty might stay a moment to let them touch it and be still enough to show them colors other than the yellow of papyrus.

I would show them how beauty can thrive under dry sun, but I knew they would not believe me. The stiff-winged butterfly would not flutter for their stiff-faced smiles. I would see the color drain out of their eyes. I would taste their salty sweat. They would mumble and trudge off to build their cracking temples.

The sweet soft fur of the butterfly made me want to kill it. The dry wind rushed over my shaking palms, smelling like dry leaves and papyrus. I was carving blurred butterflies on the belly of the cracked yellow land. Each year I will come to read it. Only I can see the blue and silver wind-blown words, covered each day by joshua, yucca, agave. *I have not told lies. I have not done wrong, I have pinned the wind to forget it.*

Additional Student Samples

Assumptions Excerpts

Hill Houses, by Kim Guthrie

The families meet here each summer on the weekends.

An older woman lives here and hikes to the open granite on sunny days.

A young up and coming musician lives in these remote hills and travels into the city for gigs and rehearsals.

Every Thanksgiving the entire family meets at this old rodeo lodge for dinner.

These people are poor. They have an old tire hanging from a tree in the front yard. The kids play in the tree house in the back and watch for rattlesnakes. They have been warned about the rattlesnakes.

The young woman never locks the door and visits the Indian reservation on a regular basis.

The cabin is a place to rest for weary hikers, climbers, and cyclists.

The store is an hour and a half down the winding road.

They have three different kinds of apple trees.

In the almond orchard, the kids drive an old seatless, doorless El Camino they call the orchard buggy.

The adults drink beer by the air conditioner.

The adults use a black belt on the kids when they misbehave.

All the kids really love their grandmother the best.

The kids are all cousins.

Some nights the kids sleep in the tunnel of the dried up creek, but when the younger kids get scared they have to go in.

Some of the kids have sex with each other.

The women aren't really happy with marriage or their husbands but it's all they know and the only way to make a living.

The old woman has always hoped to die on the warm granite on a sunny day.

She likes to cook for company and she makes a wicked stew.

The woman has never been married.

She doesn't want to marry, but she wants to have kids and raise them in the apple business.

She went to college and studied horticulture.

There are stacks of wool blankets, down comforters, and old sleeping bags inside the closet.

She goes fishing with her lover for a couple of hours on sunny days.

The two lovers eat cold hotdogs by the creek while they fish for trout.

It is very muddy when it rains.

The only women who cook have white or silver hair.

The laundry is never finished.

The grass turns yellow in the sun.

On Mutant and Other Savages, by Ara Shirinyan

1. a plant one likes

Knowing the obvious, I will tell you of the man who I really well know. A man that to this very second thinks that he is on the verge of going insane. But no, it is him turning mutant. And that is that. If I told you of the place where he lived, you could go over to his apartment and say, "Hey buddy, why are you going crazy? Do you want to talk about it? Do you want to talk about the notes from underground?" which, by the way, is by his favorite author. To this ball of questions the man going mutant would probably say, "My name is Sako, my people come from the hills and valleys and, I think that they are disappearing. . . ."

2. a lamp one likes

Inside the apartment, Sako lit the lamp on a small table, next to the couch, and placed the plant next to it. We both sat on the couch and I looked at his curly hair as he ran his hands through them. "You are a mutant, uncle, stop worrying," I told him. And he lit a cigarette and looked into the corner for comfort. He got up from the couch and went to the bedroom and then he swiftly came back. He sat next to me and told me stories of the old country. Stories of me as a young child. (Once I had hit him over the head with a hammer: for which the only explanation would be that I too had problems. That I too was, if not a mutant, a savage of some sort.)

He got up from his place and went to the bedroom again. And then he came back to repeat the whole thing. He didn't say anything till ten minutes later: "There's a person in the corner of my bedroom. Would you like to meet him?" . . .

3. what the neighbor lady asks me

I stand outside my mutant uncle's apartment door and a white lady comes up to me and stands in my face. She analyzes the stubble which I refuse to shave on a regular basis because my face will irritate and bleed.

She asks, "Are you a Muslim Terrorist?"

"No," I tell her. "I'm a savage." . . .

4. The Look of the Gaze

After the meal I looked at my uncle and I tried to help him. "I am thinking about joining the Jehovah's Witnesses. They seem to have all the answers. They can solve my hunger for the homeland," he said.

"The homeland has disappeared. We're stuck here forever. A band of savages," I said. . . .

5. On the Mother of the Mutant and the Grandmother of the Savages

I remember the Savage of them all. My grandma, who had last seen the land that disappeared. We had a conversation. I kissed her because I kiss my grandma; because I touch some of that oldness that I have never seen to miss. I said, "Uncle is turning into a mutant."

"No, your uncle is turning into a saint," she told me. "He was born already circumcised. We asked the church to help us. They did a symbolic reading of the occurrence and told us not to cut his hair for 7 years. He went around looking like a girl for seven years."

"But grandma," I went on, "that doesn't explain the failed marriage, the insanity, the people in the corners. That doesn't explain anything."

"My love, come, sit next to me. Your uncle went down the flight of stairs. Your uncle used to take photographs. Your uncle used to throw fits of rage. We cut his hair and he looked like a boy again, but he never lost that look in the eyes. That look of the gaze that would either go one way or another. Saints are not meant to be understood. They are often impossible people. Outside of all of us and nowhere to go but dying."

And this was her side of the story . . .

Found Assumptions, by Suzanne Ghiglia

The hands that write have just built a house. The hands that write have just created a meal from leftovers. The hands that write have to pick up the baby from pre-school in one hour. The hands that write have just cleaned up after themselves in the bathroom. The woman that writes wants to give up writing and wash the dishes. The woman writer wants to carry on multiple conversations while writing because she has to. The writer is listening to two different channels on two different stereos. The woman writer is listening to the sound of construction on the house next door. The writer is listening to the garden blowers and considering that is the rudest sound in the entire world. The writer thinks about gardeners who blow leaves around and dare to call it "cleaning up." The writer is surrounded by words like the gardener is surrounded by leaves and clippings and the sounds of his own machinery. The writer hates the telephone because other people call her on it. The writer loves the telephone because other people call her on it. The writer needs noise, the writer needs quiet, the kids are screaming, the kids are breathing, the kids are swallowing up time as if it were breakfast cereal. The writer needs more time to revise, the writer needs more time to waste. The writer is a woman who has just constructed a house.

Sentence Sounds

Snap Dragon, by Felicia Kreitl

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station. He stood white and frail, like an *insignificant* station himself, with cold concrete below, and a hard truth pulling away. I wanted to wave, but when I went to raise my hand I noticed my arm was frozen from the shoulder to the longest, frail finger. The other arm was squeezed at the end into a tight, terse fist. The circles around his eyes spiraled out at me from the other side of the glass, attempting to pull mine back and down in the miasmal past at Canby Street, number seventy-one ten.

I see his drab overcoat in my coffee in the palm tree-filtered sunshine mornings of lately. My white porcelain cup fills with Canby street and emotion. I'm surrounded by Celadon green Rosevilles, faded silk flowers, artsy calendars, and postcards magnetized to my refrigerator door with the light-hearted messages turned always against the cold and the far away images sinking like heavy bubbles within the narrow walls of my yellow kitchen. I am alone. I still hear him: Don't go, don't go. His voice is still tight around my throat. I didn't say good-bye—I knew I couldn't then and I know now that I never can.

My body enunciates the unspeakable in long walks and deep swallows from bottomless drinks that leave me dry. It wasn't *him* in the market, it wasn't *him* at the meeting, but I turn away, I always turn away, until, like a dirty child surrendering to a bath, loneliness undresses me in the gentle light of abandon. "Turn out the light," I always say. Darkness and bad memories stalk me in intimate places—I am already wounded—and, frail and weak, limp into the stifling cave of a man's embrace, whispering not into his ear, but to God: *Save me.* Big My palm tingles as it rubs against the hair on a man's thigh while I slowly push his clothes away, and his breathing into my undone blouse gently loosens my bra and thighs—these things I feel. When I can help it no longer, when the flesh that covers me opens like a two-lipped flower, a snap dragon, these things I feel.

But, somehow, in attempting to resist a life of bland nights and tasteless kisses, I realize, with a wrenching chill, that's all I've ever had and I know why. I stand at the curly edge of the great crater, the giant pit in my heart and I bring a picture of my father instead of a shovel to fill it. I ask myself: Who—what—is *he*?

Pain is an uneasy sensation, it is a string by which I hang and I wonder if it's made of tears or fate. I wonder if I made my father or if he made me. Or, if we're just strangers, though each with a hand from the same deck, and, both blind and binocular, play over cluttered tables and faces, disarrayed words and spaces. Father, what room or rule did you give me that I didn't already take, or make again? When will you leave me?

Under a heavy night sky, I held another's hand by a white spewing fountain and breathed a wish; he could not hear me. I wished for a yield and a gush, wished for strong bones and a lance, wished for wings and a test, wished for the past to drown like a wet cat. But: "Your hands are cold," he said, they always say to me. Do I dare tell them why?

None of them stood with him, or me, beneath the gray felt sky on the pier that day when my father dispatched sheets of pain over my young girl face amidst a Ferris wheel, cotton candy, and a crowd. My hands were not cold when I was forced to show them, shamefully gloveless, to my father and admit a loss. Why, then are my hands (naked or gloved) always cold for *them*?

I see icy frames stack around the thin hope of escape. Inside me a tiny seedling awaits blight or breeze, but while I hope for wind, I beg for death. I bathe in warm water, yet my flesh remains cold. Sometimes I fear I'll slide down the drain and appear in the younger years that I'm unable to let go. "Let go . . . , sleep well . . . , don't look back . . ." they say to me even while they look at the delicate web or the purple scar that creeps over and covers my face. But how can I let go of the lines that define me, that connect me and my beating heart and timid breath to life in a world that just wants to cover me with sterile gauze and a happy face?

I still wait at midnight for the smooth skin between a man's shoulders to open me, as though the space there was the wide entrance onto a sunlit verandah, capable of leading me from the safe warmth of dark places into the naked faith of growing grass and dying leaves. When will he come, when will I go?

In sleep, I only dream of dreams that leave me. I see what I cannot have. Though the salt of skin meets my tongue again and again, I have tasted no one. But no faint cry escapes my chest. No chill grips my flesh. Dead flowers have no scent.

The dawn finds me an even one, alone, together with nothing, always white-clad and collected. He will never whisper into my ear again. I close the door and walk backwards into loneliness, reeling with blind hands and misguided eyes.

(I only see him in the darkest shades of brown.)

9 Map 2: Burrowing

This theory-based exercise is informed by, though not derived from, Derrida's concept of supplementarity.

By the time I had failed at my one-page family chronicle I had become a sentence thinker, my whole process of writing transformed from a hard, weird struggle to describe a set of fixed ideas floating somewhere, as it seemed, inside my head, to one in which the ideas grew out of the writing in the moment of its coming into being. Charged by their own imperative and grace, they seemed to unfold as if out of the sentences themselves. This is not some literary mysticism. It is how language works, what it is.

This exercise itself has evolved over time and has achieved an odd status at my school as a local term of art known as "burrowing." I'm not sure I'd have chosen this metaphor had I known it would stick, but it is what occurred to me one day in class as I was trying very hard to make things make some kind of sense. Now students talk as if "burrowing" were a standard method of writing. They consciously use it, or don't—in other disciplines, as well as in their "creative writing" classes—and they reflect on its effect.

> Burrowing for a (no)-thing. The only difference between a mole burrowing and a writer burrowing is that the mole is unaware of the act of burrowing. Therefore, the act, in the one instance, is instinctual and in the other, a conscious clawing away of the excess (although not altogether *useless*) debris surrounding a (no)-thing which may or may not exist in the mind of the writer. A mole burrowing will cease burrowing upon its death. A writer burrowing continues to burrow after death, though now it is into the mind of the reader. A mole does not seek to be understood. That is its beauty. It never bothers about order, symmetry, aesthetic value. It simply is.—Sarah Loffler

A girl at the back of my theory class attended sporadically and never said much. I did not see much of her writing and learned her name only late in the term. Then she turned in an extraordinary papier-mâché sculpture of the linguistic sign and its supplementary logic, filled with tiny scraps of her own writing.

"Burrowing," she wrote, "has profoundly affected my writing."

It is a simple but powerful logic of writing, and it is a lot about listening.

In the preceding section, I described two exercises that involved specific things for students to *do* in their writing. I was thinking, when I wrote them, about taking novice writers step by step through writing, and I anticipated resistance as a positive value, something against which to define oneself in writing. It was only over time that I recognized the fundamental logic of the activities themselves as one that had been central to my own development as a writer.

> This could be why I was having difficulty grasping the concept that writing proceeds from language rather than image. I was trying to separate writing, language, and image in my mind. In a sense, I think the three things are interwoven. I have found through writing that language can lead to image as well as to language. In a written piece, the language and the images constantly play off of one another and interweave with one another like related and unrelated events do in my mind. In my mind they are held together by my concept of self. In a written piece they are held together by language.—Peggy Woods

The following exercise began with a logic, and grew out of what I thought was a failed theory class. It came about sometime midsemester, when everyone was grumpy from working hard and not getting anywhere. Or so it seemed to students, who by and large did not yet see "the point."

For weeks we had been reading Foucault and Derrida. We had been struggling with Saussure and the problem of language, and soon Lacan's concept of the "suture" would be coming up. It didn't help that I myself was having trouble with the discourse, with the words bollixed up in my head and me never feeling like I had got them right. My sentences, in class, would start and stop, jamming up at unexpected moments, looping back in indefinite suspension. I would, unaccountably, lapse into silence. More than once I found myself near tears, sure I was about to be discovered as a fraud.

Then one day I figured what the hell. We could go on like this, fighting at and with each other and the material. Or we could stop and reassess. Mired in something they experienced as highly unpleasant, the students knew only that this wasn't creative writing as they knew it, and it wasn't literature either. They felt aggrieved. Why was this happening to them?

Good question: *Why indeed?*

Years ago, when I was a student, I took what the teacher had to say as something just short of the word of god of scholarship and literature and grace. I thought there was a master plan. I believed it would reveal itself over time and as the fruit of diligence and faith.

Now, I was the teacher and I was still awaiting revelation.

As I began to review my own motivations for putting this course together, I realized they were highly personal and had to do with the unexpected way in which theory had given me the insight and authority to continue my own work. Looking back, I knew that for me writing had at some point come to a choice between theory and silence, and if my students now were experiencing this proverbial juncture between a rock and a hard place, they were at least entitled to know why. Only then would they be able to make their own decisions about where they might locate themselves and their work in relation to writing, and theory, and the whole rest of the world, and what it would take for them to do so. I decided it was time to tell them this. I threw out the syllabus and started talking.

Why is it hard for me to burrow? Am I chicken? Am I afraid to find something? That's spooky, because I probably just answered my own question. I am afraid to burrow because I am afraid of finding something. Oh, God. Well, who wouldn't be? Are all writers like that? Am I not a writer? Maybe it's all about adventure. And you know, there is a certain fear of breaking barriers about what is said and what cannot be said. This could be a woman thing. But I think that I am afraid to somehow say something that isn't supposed to be said and then that it will all fly apart. Desire can be manifest in words or in silence. That's the funny thing about writing is that it's silent words. Does that make it more or less real?—Susannah LeBaron

What I did was, I told them a story about me and my own writing life. And though at first I was haunted by my memories of Birth of a Poet (the class at Santa Cruz on sex, poetry, and confession) and hesitant to reenact that scene, I also knew it was the only way I could convince my students we were not that unalike, and that beyond our shared starts and stops and various frustrations and failures as writers, there was a space where writing could thrive.

I wanted them to understand the degree to which I had myself been trapped in prior modes of thinking about creativity and art, and what happened when theory let me see this and gave me a way out. The process was not easy, as the stories we tell our students are easily corrupted into bad-faith mentoring. But narrative was all I had, and it was also clear we could no longer proceed as if even writing itself were a "natural" value we all shared and agreed upon. And anyway, my story was not the same story I had been told countless times by the men who were my teachers, the one about sweating blood, and Herculean effort, and genius, and fruition, and luck—the one where your wife is not supposed to disturb you. Though my story, too, was common, I had never heard it told out loud by someone else, for my story was a woman's story, which chronicled not my successes, but my repeated failures, over and over again. In the end, this story was about how I finally figured out the main writer's story was not a woman's story at all, but a man's story in which whoever might assume the subject function was not me.

Look at where you stand in relation to the stories you hear all around you.

A writer is as a writer does. You have your myths about this writer. You hold them in your head. You say: *That's just like me, I. . . .* You say: *I don't want any part of this.* But writing is something different from the stories—any stories—about those who practice it. Writing is something we can talk about, and know, and embrace. I wanted my students to understand the story I was telling as a story about writing, and not a story about me.

Emily, Libby's grandmother, married Libby's grandfather when she was twenty years old. She became a woman with a husband. She was the same, but different. She became Em, no longer Emily. Em and her husband lived with his parents in the same house, with the same furniture, with the same silverware, with the same portraits on the wall, as they live now. A year later she gave birth to her only child, a son. She was added to again. She was the same, but different. Twenty-five years later her only son married. Twenty-eight years later her only son had a child. A girl. Libby. Em became a woman with a husband, with a son, with a daughter-in-law, with a granddaughter. Em is the same, but different. Em is a woman with cancer. She is the same, but different. Em loves the granddaughter.—Peggy Woods

So I came to the part where François was saying: *don't think.* I was trying to talk about *listening,* about *hearing,* in the words and sentences that have just been written, the next words and sentences already forming. I was trying to explain the basic concept that writing proceeds more from language than image.

And then, in a single instant, several things occurred.

Burrowing. "It's like burrowing," I said. "Archaeologically speaking. As you dig and dig, things appear, layer after layer, deeper and deeper: words after words after words."

Also, *supplementarity,* from Derrida: that language signifies according to an operation of substitution and replacement, which occurs as a supplement that results in a surplus, something added, the thing changed, new meaning.

Also, *writing:* as in, this is how language drives writing, how writing becomes an intransitive act, how not thinking opens out into text, how we as writers disappear into the writing, and the whole concept of pleasure.

It would be several years before I learned that Derrida himself referred to the logic of supplementarity as the logic of writing.

What I said that day was that supplementarity *was* burrowing, that they were the same and that they were writing, marking a moment in which theory and my story came together in such a way as to illuminate writing and to give me permission to continue. The exercise I wrote attempted to translate this experience into practice.

> burrow now she says but i ask how. i cannot write, my words a hoax, my box of letters lost my magnet string of words tumbles falling wet from water dropped in water. desensitized. i am disconnected, far away and unwilling. to tell you of my doubts, to reveal to burrow now she says but i ask how. how. writing is my tightrope walk upon a fragile limb a branch which spans a raging stream, i cannot balance, i cannot get across, i feel no trust and will not fall.—Julie Coren

And as Ronald Ortiz described it, this is at least in part what happened:

> I should start by re-stating something that everyone in my group unanimously agreed upon—this writing assignment was unlike anything we'd ever tried before. Unlike a "stream-of-consciousness" exercise that encouraged us to jot down everything that popped into our heads, we instead were directed to associate various free-form ideas into a coherent piece of fiction based on a single random sentence. The goal of this exercise, as I understood it, was to allow language to act upon us, instead of the other way around.
>
> The "burrowing" assignment, however, seems to have revealed something worthwhile in everything I've seen from it. As we all agreed, there was a surprising (and unexpected) sense of liberation in the exercise; we suddenly didn't feel compelled to write by the methods we'd been led to believe were the only ways to write true fiction. "Burrowing" wasn't necessarily easy, but it helped bypass many of the barriers that we'd often felt when trying to write something. As someone else in the class pointed out, it really "blew away" the notion of writer's block.
>
> But getting back to the quality of the writing, I was really surprised by the clarity. None of this, "No, no . . . that isn't what I mean," or, "you're not understanding what I'm trying to say." Instead, the various writers seemed truly surprised when the others in the group offered unanimous agreement on what they were reading. In my own case, I discovered a certain consistency in what I had written that I wasn't entirely aware of as the writing

> was taking place. The recurring motifs of futility and inevitable death, while still awkwardly presented, were ideas that would have been garbled into a ponderously vague gibberish had I made an active effort to convey them.

Or, Margo McCall.

> The third thing that had a major effect was the idea that one should just write, should silence the internal critic and editor, and let meaning metonymically accrue. The notion was a radical departure from the way I've come to write. Write one sentence. Read it. Write another sentence. Read it. Write a paragraph. And read that too. Like building a brick wall. Letting the words accrue and speak for themselves, not having much idea of what I was even writing, felt tremendously natural. The result was an entirely different tone—my voice I think—different ways of producing sentences, of producing meaning, and most importantly, what I said became actually more meaningful.

Or, Susannah LeBaron:

> Maybe I just mean burrowing. See, the thing about burrowing is that it's everywhere. It is a life lesson. Cause burrowing is also like holding and listening. So, it's also about life.

The first time I wrote the burrowing exercise I blasted it out before class, on an old typewriter in my office, complete with typos and cross-outs. That copy got lost in the earthquake, and later turned into something like this:

> **BURROWING**
>
> **Reading:** Ferdinand de Saussure, "The Object of Study" and "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign"
> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"
>
> The Saussurean theory of the sign, together with the Derridean critique of the center and its resulting (where is the origin?) logic of the supplement, can have profound implications for us as writers. Prior to the (received) loss of the transcendental signifier we could still proceed as if writing were some kind of translation, from thought to word, as if the thoughts, and even the story, existed somehow outside of language, in the heart and soul, the inspiration, of the writer. Writing, in such a model, became an arduous but predictable process of "finding the right words" to describe what went on in your head. A story, in such a model, might be thought of as a very long sentence, a comforting concept: you just had to fill it in. But what happens when, lacking any center (Derrida never said there wasn't a center, he said the center was a func-

> tion), you cannot point the old way, and cannot, either, escape from the lack, can fill it in only with itself, are obliged to an endless play of meaning, rather than meaning itself, which of course, being human, you crave?
>
> The answer is: *writing.* Writing happens.
>
> > Derrida: "Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around" (121).
>
> In the play of substitution and replacement, which is our way of making meaning, we substitute for what was never really there, the center, and in the process we add something (a "supplement"), and the thing we started with is, in some small way, deferred and transformed. In writing, one possible meaning of the logic of the supplement is that writing itself becomes an endlessly unfolding process. Think of the narrative itself as a sign. As soon as something is added, the narrative is changed, made different, meaning is deferred, and all that precedes what is written is also irrevocably altered. You add, you keep adding, you keep adding, one sentence, and then another, and then another.
>
> This is what I call *burrowing,* which, also because we are human, can exhaust itself. We have talked about ways in which writing proceeds from language rather than image. This is partly about that. Take a word, a sentence: it functions as a sign. Compelled by the process of signification, you burrow into the sign, play it for all it is worth. At the end of that sentence/sign/play, stop, add a new one, begin again, and again, and again.
>
> Your assignment is to try writing by burrowing deep into language. Write three to five pages using the peculiar logic I have just described above. Listen carefully to the words around and in you until you hear a sentence that sparks another sentence. Then begin, paying strict attention to the imperative force of the language you are using. This may be characterized by rhythm and sound as much as it may by meaning. Don't worry, either, about making a "story." That will most certainly take care of itself.

In that class, the first time, what happened was: *writing.*

Melody Stevenson "discovered the voice" and wrote the first pages of what would become her novel, *The Life Stone of Singing Bird* (Faber and Faber, 1996).

And Nancy Krusoe wrote, "Landscape and Dream."

When she wrote it, Nancy said, "It's nothing, not really, just a terrible mess."

We talked about different ways to read it as a story.

When Nancy sent this story out, the credits accumulated quickly—*Georgia Review, Best Southern Stories,* and *Best American Short Stories, 1994.*

What she said in the "Notes" for this latter is:

> I wrote this story while I was a student in Katharine Haake's Theory of Fiction class at CSUN. The exercise she designed is called the "burrowing exercise." The idea is to take a word or sentence and burrow into it—supplement it—following wherever it takes you until it stops or you lose the desire to continue. Then add another piece of language and repeat the process. I began with, "A barn is a beautiful place . . ." and worked from one word to the next, each set of words calling for another set, and I discovered that words in stories, like poems, could touch in pleasurable ways that would bring up new material, a new situation, and more words. This process became compelling and exciting, each word charged by its own necessity and surplus, and the distance was reduced between me and the sound of the sentence. At the same time, we were reading French feminist theory, specifically Julia Kristeva's notion of the *chora*, the semiotic rhythms of language primarily associated with women's writing, writing in which you work more closely with sound than narrative, although Kate Haake says this story is loaded with narrative and I guess it is. (340)

Here is the story itself:

> **Landscape and Dream**
>
> *Cows*
>
> A **BARN** is a beautiful place where cows are milked together. Our barn has many windows facing east and west. These windows have no glass in them.
>
> You get up early in the morning to milk cows. You pour warm white milk into heavy gray metal cans with matching metal tops that fit like a good hat, and these tops are very pretty, their shape a circle with a brim over the neck of the can.
>
> Warm cow milk has a certain smell, a from inside-the-body smell, the way your finger smells pulled out of your own vagina.
>
> Women who are married to dairy farmers stand in their kitchens at their kitchen windows and stare longingly at their husbands' barns, but they don't go there. Barns are female places; they are forbidden places for women. These women stand at their kitchen windows staring at their husbands' barns because barns are beautiful female places, full of sweet-milked, happy, honey-faced cows being milked by men's hands or by machines with cups. Cows have rough-skinned teats, sometimes scraped and scratched, chapped and bleeding, which fit into these cups put on by men whose hands are not gentle.
>
> So the wife I am talking about stands at her kitchen window facing east. She has no one to be with. Unlike the cows and the

men in the barn (her husband and her son, who helps his father for a while), she is alone. I, the daughter; am in the barn, too—young enough to be there a little while longer. But I would like for the wife, my mother, to leave the farmer; to go away from the farm and the barn and this warm longing for cows.

Our barn is a cold place in winter with only the heat of cows to warm you. You stand very close to their large bodies so that you won't frost over like the windows of the kitchen where you stare, looking for your mother to see if she is watching you.

On the other side of the barn, the east side, are the hill and the lake at the bottom of the hill and the gray-brown grass that holds this hill in place in winter. Tiny slivers of ice float on the lake in winter, at dusk and during the night, and they melt each morning when the sun comes up. Our cows slide through mud to drink cold morning water, because even though they're full and ready to be milked, their mouths are saliva machines with licorice colored tongues, thick and dark with cud and the need for water. I see them standing by the side of the lake, their knees bent a little, bracing themselves as they lean over the icy water, mud rising up their delicate sweet ankles. *Hurry, drink fast,* I say. *Hurry, hurry.*

Seeing them like this makes me want to be a cow, but which kind would I be? There are dainty, needle-brown Jerseys, big woolly Guernseys, and the large, black-and-white-spotted, famous-for-milk Holsteins. There is also the plain black cow.

When cows come to the barn to be milked, it's a happy, sloppy time of day for them, and I am there waiting. They all push in at once, rushing toward me as I stand at the far end of the barn—in case one goes wild I will stop her—and running, some of them, because their favorite food is waiting there (that delicious grainy mixture of oats and wheat and barley and who knows what else that I myself eat along with them out of cupped hands). They are running toward me, looking at me, and then abruptly turning in, one by one, each into her own place, and someone will close the stanchions around their necks for milking, because you can't have them visiting—wandering around and disturbing each other during milking—of course not. Each one has her own place, her own stanchion, and she remembers it; out of fifty or sixty stalls, each cow knows her own. How: Smell? Number of footsteps from the door to the slippery spot at the entrance to her place? Or rhythm—how many sways of the heavy stomach, the bloated udder, back and forth to the stall that is hers?

I remember how it was to be inside the barn with all those steamy, full-of-milk, black-and-white cows, with their sweet, honey-barn faces and their clover-alfalfa breath. And their beautiful straight backbones that you could rub between your fingers across the length of their bodies, a delicate spine for all that weight underneath. And light falling through the windows. I washed their udders, washed them all with the same brown cloth soaked in disinfected water, their teats covered with dirt, and sometimes I didn't get it all off they were so swollen (of course, I didn't know how it felt, not for years did I know how that felt), but they didn't mind. No words were spoken there in the barn—or if they were, they weren't between me and the men. I didn't feel it so much then—well, maybe more than I thought—but I felt the bodies of cows, dozens of them, their big, sloppy, breathy faces and sighs in the barn with me.

In the kitchen, it isn't a happy time of day: cooking breakfast, half moon, half dark. My mother stands there waiting. Anyone could come, even cows could come to her flower bed outside the kitchen window, could lie down and wait with her for the farmer—and the daughter—to return. There is nothing to stop them from coming to her, coming to her window, nothing at all.

The Farmer

Sometimes men beat their dairy cows. Sometimes they hit them with lead pipes, and the cows fall down; they slide down in their cow shit on the floor of the barn, fall down on their bones into shit puddles while the daughter is standing at the barn door staring for a very long time at the floor, at the slick running cow pee that has soaked everything the cow was standing on and is now lying in, on her bones, and she is crying.

Is the cow crying? Heaving, trying to stand up on her feet (her feet are so pretty—little hooves like tiny irons), which slip again every time he hits her.

Her head's in the stanchion, her head's trapped, but she can stand up. *Please don't get up again,* I tell her; but it makes no difference: he hits her again. I hope cows don't feel pain; I hope they don't have brains. I hope they have fires in their hearts. If they had brains, I would have to hold them and kiss them and tell my mother at the window what has gone on—not just in her garden but here in her husband's barn. I would have to tell her I hope that the next time the tractor turns over, the farmer is under it.

When a man is beating a cow, a young cow, what is he thinking? Does he think how beautiful she is, struggling to stand? Does he think how she will never stand again unless he lets her, *unless he lets her?*

I am talking about cows which sometimes aren't so beautiful to look at. They love to bathe in slushy red mud, get covered in dirt. Their brains are made of salt licks and saliva so they won't feel pain, you see what I mean? What kind of puzzle could a cow solve? Not the kind a word would solve, a kind word. That's what I mean.

I am talking about women like my mother who watch barns, waiting, because they cannot stop watching with their eyes and hearts, as if smoke will arise, as if smoke will come out of that barn, as if the men and cows will be burned, as if she can stop her daughter from being there in the barn, in the fire, as if she can hold her daughter back, can close the barn door with the power of her eyes—but this will not be enough. The mother watches her daughter move in slowly toward the barn where she will become a cow, where nothing can stop her, where the cow she becomes is the cow her father beats with a metal pipe over and over on her back, on her shoulders and her stomach, on her whole brown bony small body, and the daughter hides inside the cow's body and screams, stop, *stop*.

But do you think he hears, or—if he hears—that he believes what has become of his daughter? What will the farmer tell his wife? What will the daughter tell her mother? Nothing. She will hear nothing about it, for remember, this is a young girl watching her father, and he's beating the cow with a pipe that's long and gray and hollow; he holds it with both his hands. The cow is young like the daughter who's watching. What can she possibly have done to deserve such a beating? Did the young cow kick the girl's father? Being young, she might not have known better, but the girl sees no blood on her father. She looks at his arms and his face and sees nothing but rage—his mouth is clamped shut and his eyes are huge and still swelling in his head. (He has taken off his glasses, and the daughter notices this: that her father isn't wearing his glasses and she can see his eyes.) He looks strange to her. He could be holding back tears, she thinks. He is holding back something, but look at all that is coming out.

The girl looks toward her house, which is across the road from the barn; she searches for her mother in the window to see if she is watching the way she sometimes does. It is too far and too dark to tell. And so the daughter looks back at the barn, at her father in the barn, this man who without his glasses has eyes she hardly knows. This young cow is called, she knows, a heifer. What else should she know?

The Kitchen

We had a chair in our kitchen that was so large I could sit in it doubled up and still have room for my brother and a tub of peas for me to shell. On my right as I sat in the chair, I could see the pasture in front of our house, out the kitchen window, where animals sometimes grazed—cows and horses. The sky was bluer here than anywhere else. Behind the pasture was a semicircle of pine trees, a screen which blocked my view of anything beyond it and formed the limits of my world.

It was on this pasture of grass that phantom men, invaders, conquerors, arose from the earth one day, riding on dusty brown horses, circling the field, riding toward our house. These horsemen wore dusty red scarfs on their necks and blankets on their backs. Dirt from deep inside the earth all about them was kicked up by their horses' feet as we sat, my mother and I, inside the kitchen, waiting for them to surround us, to terrify us, to tell us what they wanted, what crimes they were going to commit. Of course, I opened the door; this was long before I began, in later dreams, to slam and lock all doors and windows against strange men. Tribesmen from deep inside the earth—what could be better? What had they come for? For me, of course. They had come to take me away, or to tell me the secrets of life—whichever, I was ready. I am sure my mother knew, could see that I was ready.

I looked at my mother and wondered what she thought about and if she loved cows the way I loved them. I am the one who watched her, and watching her was all in the world I did for years.

Like her I became a cow and I became a mother. I became the barn and the hill behind the barn, the lake and the water cows drink from the lake, the salt and saliva in their mouths. I became, for a while, entirely these things—nothing more. And this is not enough.

Chapter 9 Addendum: Burrowing, Alternate Version

Imagine writing as a perpetual unfolding: you begin with a single sentence, to which you add, by the sheer force of language itself, just another sentence, which adds a little bit to the first. Now, in place of a single sentence, you have two, to which you add a third. Each time you supplement your text, you are adding on to the whole that precedes it, and, each time, the whole is transformed. You keep adding and keep adding, and the story grows.

There is a complex poststructuralist logic by which I have come to understand exactly how writing grows out of language, its own imperative carried in the weight of each sentence, by which the next sentence is always already determined. This logic suggests that the meaning-making impulse of language (itself a system of *signs)* is organized according to a process of substitution and replacement. In this process, we replace the-idea-of-the-thing *(signified)* with the idea-of-the-sound-of-the-word-of-the-thing *(signifier)*, and in this way agree to let a certain meaning stand. It is also, this logic, about such wondrous things as paradox and contradiction, presence and absence, desire and identity and writing, but for our purposes we will concentrate on writing.

Writing itself, for example, is ongoing, shifting, and fluid, and the meaning we agree on will not stand for long, but will continue to be subject to the arbitrary play of the very process that produced it. For instance, let's say we're writing a story, and we add sentence three to sentences one and two. Not only do we have a third sentence, but the third sentence has changed what sentences one and two mean—maybe slightly, maybe enormously. This is one example of what Jacques Derrida calls a *logic of supplementarity*, and it is important because this very same principle of shifting that inheres in how we make meaning in language repeats itself in writing, moving writing forward in an endlessly unfolding process that grows, paradoxically, not out of some preexisting idea in our heads, but the logic of writing itself.

For the most part, however, this is not how we learn how to write; we do not immerse ourselves in this compelling logic, in which all these substitutions and supplements are occurring. Most of us learn, instead, to write "backwards," as if our ideas *did* exist somehow outside language. We turn writing into a struggle to find the right words to express the ideas. In this model of writing you can see how successful you are by working backwards from the text to your ideas, just the same way you can check an arithmetic problem by reversing its procedures. But it dulls the writing, turns it to translation, never mind what it does to your head and your heart, where writing also comes from.

Some writers say that this way of talking about writing is not useful; and certainly most writers simply aren't used to this lingo of "sign" and "supplement" and "substitution." Other writers claim it is transforming. Theory is as theory does. This is just a way of writing, is all. It is a way of writing that relieves us of the obligation to know what's coming next and gives us permission to play—to reduce, if you will, the distance between ourselves and the sound of the sentence, so to ignite pleasure. It is about how writers, like musicians, pick up the beat.

This exercise proceeds from what Derrida calls "supplementarity," and what I call "burrowing," and it assumes that every sentence carries in itself the imperative of its own next sentence. But here's good news: You may, if you wish, forget about all this, about Derrida and these terms I've been tossing around, and imperative and whatnot, because all you really need to do is write. In the following exercise, you play the mole of language, digging far and deep. It is one way of writing, which you should explore here without preconceptions, to see how it works for you—one sentence after another.

Begin, then, with a single sentence. Listen hard for the beat to see and hear where it touches, in what pleasurable ways, other words and sounds and sentences. Then add another sentence and repeat. Add another. Add another. Keep adding and adding. Burrow deep into the sentences you write, as if on an archaeological dig. Turn your words and their sounds and their sentences over and over. Pay close attention to sound and rhythm. Listen for sparks, for connections, to the force of your own desire.

When the initial impulse of your first sentence—its sense of play and what grows out of it—has exhausted itself, stop. Make a white space, begin again with a new sentence, and continue.

Repeat.

Continue.

Pick up the beat. (Story will take care of itself.)

A little story:

Karl Jung, the psychoanalyst, was treating the writer James Joyce's daughter. As Jung tried to explain her mental disease, which was profound, Joyce brushed him off dismissively. Joyce said his daughter's mental state, as Jung had described it to him, just sounded like his own, when he was writing. Jung said that may be so: the only difference was that Joyce was *diving*, while his daughter was *drowning*.

Probably apocryphal, but there it is.

Burrowing, I suspect, is a little bit like *diving*.

Or like this: When I asked my Japanese sister-in-law how to bow to her father, she smiled and said, "Go low. As low as you can."

10 Map 3: Self-Reflections and the Scene of Writing

> When I write, I never know who is speaking. Though I know it isn't me—Eric the object—he cannot be captured. It is a reflection of Eric, a facet perhaps, a certain combination which I will never be able to repeat. Eric is always moving from moment to moment, from experience to experience. Time ticks by and I am not a photograph. We are organic. I will not be a snapshot of my culture, that is what the news is for—isn't it? Is that what anything is for? How could I write if I had no limit to push, no questions to ask? How could I get out of bed in the morning? This sense of play is what makes Eric human.
>
> —Eric Kintler

In many if not most cases, as young writers we remain largely absent from our own writing scenes. This is just part of how we learn writing, and it begins, in a sense, with our image of the writer who is not like us (remember Linda Brodkey's icon of the *Male Author Writing Literature Alone in his Attic Garret by the Light of a Thin Gray Candle*), and it ends, if it does, with an emerging sense of selves in one's own writing moment. Such an evolution depends on developing an awareness of how strictly speech is regulated in our cultural institutions, as well as of the various forms of dissonance, alienation, and silence we internalize in order to defend against the sounds of our own voices. But this is abstract talk, and getting students there is a whole different matter.

If we are going to frame our teaching as an opening up, not a closing off, of writing, then we must begin by helping students see and hear themselves inside the ideologically charged scenes that constitute their first practice of writing. Since ideology retains its power largely to the extent that it remains invisible, our initial writing practice must feel both "natural" and inevitable, for it cannot help but seem as if we are simply, in our writing, "expressing ourselves" through the transparent lens of our "natural" language.

I remember spending years inside the mode of thought that enabled me to experience writing as transparent expression. I wrote well but as if in some other tongue—one familiar to the rest of you, perhaps, but not to me. I was distant and alienated inside my own work.

Foucault urges us to ask who gets to use what discourses when, how those discourses move through the culture, and so on. These are useful questions to share with students, for they provide pathways into writing that we may not, in their absence, always see.

In a senior-level narrative writing class one spring, five African American women students constituted something of a coalition. They ran a political spectrum from radical to conservative but shared issues of gender and race and often spoke in what seemed to be a unified voice.

For workshop one day, one of these women submitted a story that had a marked autobiographical element. The text was organized as a chronicle of events, as they might actually have happened, over the course of several weeks in the student's life: *this happened, I called so and so, he came and got me, then this happened, then, in the morning, we . . .* And so on. The reported events were both traumatic and mundane, and the narrative made no attempt to distinguish between them—a casual ride from one place to another was treated with the same dispassionate reporting as sudden homelessness, for example, or a solitary abortion. Though the student referred to her work as a "short story," she also acknowledged it as part of her "autobiography," which she saw as an ongoing project. The events, she insisted, had to go in as they were, because that's how they had happened. She did get kicked out of her apartment; she did have her abortion all alone; so and so did pick her up.

As the teacher I tried to focus the discussion on conventions of genre and form. We talked about how work is received, and how, if marked as a "short story," the reader reads it as fiction and expects it to conform to certain conventions, primarily those of placement, displacement, and replacement. We also talked about the difference between "fiction" and "autobiography," how they are ontologically different, and how the way in which we *know* them affects not just our reading but also our writing. And we talked about organizing texts to generate narrative tension, especially by structuring the kernel events in such a way as to foreground enigma and the hermeneutic code.

"But," I finally had to say, "as it is currently written this is not really a 'short story.'"

"What do you mean?" one of the other African American women complained. "She's telling her story. That makes it a story."

"Literary short stories," I explained, "conform to certain narrative conventions. Texts circulate in the world according to the way they align themselves with one set of conventions or another." While the text we were discussing might well tell a "story," it would not be classified—I stood my ground—with the kinds of short stories we were focusing on in this class.

"Why," the student harrumphed, "that's brainwashing. Plain and simple."

No doubt I've been accused of many things in my teaching, but rarely to my face and never before—to my knowledge—of brainwashing. And though another student quickly challenged, "Have you ever heard of an education?" I admit to being stumped, then and now. It is easy to dismiss the student's reaction. She clearly did not get the point, and "overreacted" in an "off-the-wall" student-sort-of-way.

But as I tried to explain that my point was exactly that—yes, she *should* be able to write whatever kinds of stories she wanted, but to do so successfully she would first have to learn the forms she aspired to, the rules of the discourse, all the prior modes of expression, and so forth—I kept getting blank stares and more of the "brainwasher" looks.

Yeah, yeah, they seemed to say. *White-girl-dr.-professor doesn't understand that my story is* my *story and I'll tell it like I like it, is all.* My *story's a black story, like other black stories.*

I want to say that, of course, we were both right, but I'm not even convinced of that anymore. Naturally, I believed I had the broad view and that for her to "own" her story she had to place it in relation to a particular tradition she might aspire to. I still believe that. But I also see now that, inside her world view, my world view is largely irrelevant.

Whose world view counts?

Of course it is easiest to proceed as if mine does, for I'm the authority, with a Ph.D. and power: I give grades.

And yes, again, in terms of what this student had to learn in my classroom, "my" world view was what she was supposed to be learning. But I was learning too. And one thing I was learning was I could talk all I wanted about modernist scenes of writing, and most of what I was saying would mean little or nothing to this group of women in my class. Their struggles for speech were informed not just by their blackness, but by iconographies of artists I might not even recognize. Forget garrets and thin, gray candles. Where and how does each student struggle, on her own, to measure up?

I think I was probably asking some, but not all, of the right questions, and probably not in the right order. I'm the one who quit writing after reading *Moby-Dick*, so of course I immediately resonated with the artist-in-the-garret icon. Him, and Woolf's "angel in the house." You have to kill your demons, in a way, is what I knew. And I also knew that your demons are chosen for you by your culture and your class, your gender and your race, your point of time in history—by "who you are," culturally and historically, yes, but also very personally.

I knew this, and I talked a good line about garrets-as-metaphors and so forth, but I'd forgotten how completely we forget ourselves along the way in school, and I'd also not allowed for the complex tangled webs of our forgetting.

What these students were beginning to teach me was that first, before you can remember who you are, you must identify your own private writing demons, and then dispense with them, one by one. This is not something for which we can proffer any generic prescription, and the lure is abstract and hard to understand. For of course the lure is just the possibility of coming into a way of being in one's own work that may constitute a form of voice. And of course we cannot know or even desire such a lure until we recognize our essential displacement in the only modes of expression we have ever known.

I did not, in particular, want my student to abandon her autobiography, but just to see it in a context that would help her to make it "better," or more "powerful," or just more "readable"—to enter, as it were, more seamlessly into the conversation of her choosing. In context, she might also recognize what she was writing as more purely "personal" (as in a journal), and decide (or not) to change it. I was not making value judgments, and I was not prescribing or brainwashing. It was just a missing link was all, a step, the absence of which enabled her still to experience herself as a writer as "natural," "inalienable," "righteous."

This is nothing against righteousness at all. But the irony is that until we can see ourselves clearly in relation to the discourse that frames us, whatever discourse that might be, we continue to reflect it back, unchallenged and unchanged. Almost, it's like talking in some kind of vacuum: we hear ourselves mouthing words, but they disperse, like ether, around us. There is nothing "natural" about who we are as writers. We turn out the way we are by virtue of our experience in culture, in class, in gender, in race, in family, in history, in being. There is nothing new in saying so, but when we say so to novice writers, they feel—as I once felt, so passionately—*what about ME? Myself. My expression. My being.*

It took me several years, back then, to understand that it was precisely *me* who had, in those prior modes of thought, been effaced. Accommodating my own "voices" to received ideas of what "good writing" was, I became more absence than presence. When I learned to name the things—what I was trying to produce as well as who I felt myself to be in some relation to those modes of production and their products—

then I could hear myself speak. Though the practice of naming itself may feel artificial and unnatural, it is a means of starting back along the way toward possibilities of being, writing, speech.

I have used variations of the following two-part exercise in writing classes at all levels to promote higher levels of writerly self-consciousness in writing. Such awareness—the ability, for example, to place our writing selves in a writing context and see through it—functions as the missing link above. Brodkey argues that we can't not struggle with the genius-writer-in-the-garret icon when we write, that it lodges itself inside us and forces dissonance and dislocation into the moment of writing itself. As I've tried to make clear above, the garret is just a metaphor, and we might not even recognize another writer's demon. Still, the concept of struggle connotes a high degree of self-awareness and determination to begin with, and the first step with many novice writers is to provide a context within which they can give themselves permission to put themselves back into their own writing scenes. Then the struggle can begin.

This two-part exercise is designed to construct the possibility of such a context. It is designed to let us hold on to ourselves a little harder, put off going absent, avoid sounding the way we think we are supposed to sound, and sound instead a little more like us. It is suitable for almost any level of writing instruction, and I used it recently at the new low-residence Antioch M.F.A. program. Students received their assignments in the mail, worked independently—having never met each other—and then arrived in L.A., with their boxes. Some grumbled.

One accomplished poet said outright, "I did not want to do this exercise. Of all the preassigned work, I dreaded this the most. Then, when I finally started doing it, late one night, it completely took over. I really enjoyed it and loved what I wrote. Why is that?"

Another said, "I loved you for making me do that box and how it opened up writing, then I hated you because it was so hard, then I loved you, then I hated you, then . . . right up to the end."

What can I say? Writing exercises do sometimes have the power to surprise us, to take us up, where we did not expect to go, for that is the very nature of writing. This exercise is designed to take you where you don't expect to go by taking you back into your own experience as a writer. In large measure, it is influenced by Foucault's questions about the modes of existence of a discourse, where and how it has been used, and who can use it. In theory, these are abstract concepts that students do not see as so important in their writing. In practice, the concepts split everything open.

This exercise begins with a box.

Student Samples

Autobiographies (Excerpts)

Summer 1990

During the spring 1990 at Pierce College, I decided to be a writer and major in English. I attended an 8-week creative writing class through the adult education program taught by a woman whose name I do not recall.

The hypothesis. Teach students how to master language. Teach students formulas for various types of writing.

The prediction. Students will be successful creative writers if they master language and follow the formulas for writing short stories, narrative essays, and a novel in 7 weeks.

The experiments. Describe a Stranger. Describe an act of nature. Describe an odor. Describe a taste. Describe a movement. Take and describe a bubble bath. Rewrite the following sentences for clarity and verbosity. Record a conversation. Avoid non-verbs.

The report. I ended up with writing that, once revised, might be publishable in *Reader's Digest* and similar magazines. . . . I left that class with definite ideas about how to do writing. I needed an idea or a subject. I needed to think about the idea or subject. I needed time to write what I had thought. I needed to revise my writing, paying close attention to my word selection which would communicate my thoughts. I needed an agent.

—Traci Wise

Reflections on the Writing Life: Part 1

And then there are boxes, which contain things, or hold them together.

In the Japanese culture, the gift box is as important as the gift. Covered in the most extravagant papers, cut and folded according to some complex origami logic, the box is itself an external expression of gratitude, love, celebration, respect.

When you are young, you scrounge your moving boxes at the grocery or the local liquor mart. You crush and recycle the wine bottle inserts and cram your books and other personal belongings where they were. Much later in life, you may buy all the boxes you need, or use the ones the moving company provides.

Maybe you keep your jewelry in a hinged rattan basket, your Little League game balls in a shoebox, your fluorescent rocks in a card file with a hole cut in the top for the UV lamp, and another in the end, for viewing. When you turn on the lamp, the rocks glow inside, brilliant, otherworldly, iridescent. Outside of the box, they are common and dull.

Artist Lisa Bloomfield uses autobiography boxes in her photography classes. I have heard of a practice that turns the box itself into a story. This is not about the story that the box is—or the poem—but about the writing that grows out of the box, which you will assemble over time.

My writing career began in the third grade. I was nine years old and I took up a ten cent spiral pad and a two fisted green pencil. Already my personality was fixed—I was shy, I was a loner, I carried with me a bag of wreckage that needed somehow to be sorted out. I suppose I wanted to write a story about a red rubber ball, but that would come latter so I wrote a bit of fictions about playing with my friends.

I wrote my story during recess, during lunch, and I suppose during class time. My grandfather picked me up from school that day.

"Read my story," I said.

"Now," he said.

His left hand guided the car while his right hand fumbled with flipping the cover back to expose the written word. His eyes darted from the road to my story.

"Read it out loud," I said.

"My friends and I were planning," he said. "We were planning outside."

I had misspelled the word play, crucial to my story. "Stop," I said, and I did not write again until I was a freshman in high school.

—Ken Seiwert

I was born orange. Of course, I do not actually remember this fact, but I have it on the best authority. My mother told me so and very recently at that. I am not even sure of the exact circumstances of her telling me, but I still hear her words ringing and her laughter trilling in my mind. Her laughing and gay are rare

For this exercise, become a collector of things that belong in your box. You alone will know them, what belongs, like nodes of energy or sentences that spring full-blown into your head.

My own might contain the perfect tiny conch shell I found on a fog-bound Monhegan island one summer in Maine, the mottled gray and green Western seagull chick's feather I just brought back from Anacapa Island, a shard of Mimbres pottery, the rusted tin salt shaker I found on the banks of the upper Sacramento, baby hair, a scrap of Peruvian wool, a small part of the skin of a grapefruit, raw umber paint, leaves, lava, a rock shaped like the mountains of Montana.

Your box will contain whatever strikes or defines you at any particular moment: ticket stubs, old basketball shoelaces, marbles, pressed butterflies, a lipstick, a sugar packet, thread, sequins, sports medals, glue. You may want to include old things that you have saved and that have great sentimental value—your baby's hospital bracelet, your army induction notice; or you may want to collect things, instead, at random, a round ocher-yellow pebble, cactus spines, sweet-smelling soap.

Some care, too, should go into the selection of the box. A Nike shoebox is bigger than the box your graduation watch came in, but either might do for this exercise. You may wish to build your box out of paper, occurrences in my experiences of her. Perhaps that is why I am so impressed that I was once, however briefly, orange.

—Marion Heyn

I could write about how I don't even belong to the text of a simple dictionary. I've been trying to avoid personifying the earthquake because I know it was nothing personal. I wasn't even grateful to be alive. The only thing that mattered was keeping the balloon in the air. As I held up each shirt, I told her where I got it and any key events which occurred while I wore it.

—Evans Brasfield

I've stopped writing but no one knows it because this line immediately follows the previous paragraph. Today, the day of the fire that burned Malibu down, I stood in front of the mirror wishing the colors I saw burned all those beautiful houses. My sin still burned from the afternoon sun. A windburn, a flame dog, a flame of destruction. Bleached and baked and burned. Tortured by the winds, I kept losing my thoughts.

—Traci Wise

I started writing when I was eleven. I was in Germany, Heidelberg. My father was doing something technical for an aircraft company and I was in our apartment with nothing to do most of the time. My first writing was a letter to my Grandmother about the sink in the apartment. The sink dripped even with a new washer in it and it had an old rusted stain. The stain was rust

cardboard, wood, scraps of fabric. Remember that the outside of the box is also space, and that the surfaces are like an artist's canvas.

As I write this, my eight-year-old son is building a box out of discarded clay kitchen tiles for a school project. They are heavy and resist his intentions. He is using aqua green contact cement.

This exercise proceeds from the same "combinatorial" logic that Italo Calvino says governs writing. What he says is that writing itself is a process of "combinatorial play" in which the writer tosses words together until they make that spark that takes the writer down into the space where writing happens.

Principle: A person never simply speaks; there has to be a context in which that person feels privileged to speak. Here we create such a context.

Directions:

1.

Imagine your box as a private space for writing into which you can slip and work your way, at odd angles, into memory and language.

2.

Write the autobiography of your writing life, guided by the objects you've assembled that surround you, as well as by the space itself, a container not just for who you are but for the words that spark and play there, your own language. How is it, exactly, you have become your writwith greenish spots that looked blue at night. I wrote we have a blau blau ablau.

—Ann Holley

Enough of that. When did I begin to write? I have no idea. In second grade I received a 'C' in Handwriting class, a traumatic time for me, but this is not writing. I remember being fifteen and sixteen, thinking that the longer the word the more profound its meaning as I flipped through the pages of my Roget's replacing every word. And why did I do that? Because I was trying to do what was expected of me. I was trying for the affection of Teacher, of the "A+ Good Work You are one of my brightest students. Mrs. Brown" sort of statements. I was not learning more about myself, exploring my own potential but trying to unlock the doors of literature, of writing. Did I want to be an adult? I think so. At least I did not want to be in transition. I wanted to be accepted. And yet I did not want to be invisible. This conflict could never be resolved.

—Eric Kintler

Our course of action must be to change the images. But if we simply replace one solitary image with another, I think we take a greater risk of marginalizing and ignoring people. One image is limiting.

—Kim Guthrie

ing self? What is that whole complex story?

This may be a function as much of your first pair of red high-heeled shoes, the lilac bush you planted beneath your bedroom window, the arc of your childhood handspring, as it is of the teacher who once told you you had talent.

(What is talent anyway, I wonder?

Don't you?)

3.

Bring your box in a paper bag to class. Also bring four copies of what you wrote about your writing life.

Reflections on the Writing Life: Part 2*

Now, think about the garret where the genius (male) writer sits, authoring great literary works by the light of his thin gray candle. Where are you in this picture? What do you have to do to yourself to make yourself fit in at all?

The garret, as a metaphor, may seem anachronistic, but it is just a metaphor, is all. For the writer who haunts your own internal self may be a woman with children, feeling guilty over sometimes choosing writing first. It may be a mountain man in Montana, living on the edge of the wilder-

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* Part 2 of this excercise was developed in collaboration with Sandra Alcosser and Wendy Bishop.

My writing started the day I left my father.

—Ann Holley

I knew that I could not write. But I quickly realized that no one else could either. This was comforting. I could not write about what was in the trunk in my grandmother's attic. I could not write about how I felt on the first day of school. I could not write about the sexy blonde. I can only write—with any interest that is—about things I do not understand. Things that I can only explain with image or scene. I do not know what I am writing about when I write, otherwise I know that I would never do it. I get bored very easily, and I am terrified by that feeling.

—Eric Kintler

I don't ever speak. I'm deaf and dumb. I look at the black, mute box. It's silent, but I hear my father say, "Damn." He never really spoke to me.

—Ann Holley

The New American Webster Handy College Dictionary defines being or pertaining to a text. Explore autobiographical textuality. Those are some big words. I decided to look up "autobiography" for amusement and that is when I found out I was not allowed to do this assignment. This is not a lame excuse. "Autobiography is defined as a 'biography of a person written by himself.'" I'm not a him so I cannot do this assignment.

—Amy Reynolds

ness and using only paper and pen. It may even be your writing teacher—your first one or your current one, it doesn't really matter. What matters is the dissonance created between your ideal image of a writer writing and you fumbling for words. What matters is how this dissonance makes obstacles to writing.

For of course, when we try to adapt ourselves to this ideal image we start to behave in certain ways that are not good for writing. Our first move on the page, for example, may be to disappear. I'm not sure why we learn this trick so completely, or why we are so readily convinced of its necessity, but I do know that whenever we find ourselves struggling with that other ideal writer inside us, who we try our hardest not to sound like is ourselves.

Of course all the scenes of writing portrayed above are metaphors, not literal places at all, which describe, in some essential way, how we construct writing, and what we see as being possible in (and perhaps through) it. Given that, how might your writing be affected if you gave your self permission either: (1) to accept your own writing space or scene as it currently exists, or (2) to invent a new one in which you might, for a change, sound just like you.

The Directions:

To begin, think about your own scene of writing, where and how and when you literally do it.

Fall 1992

I enrolled in English 308, Narrative Writing, with you as the teacher.

The hypothesis. Ask students difficult questions about writing in general and their own in particular. Have them respond through writing.

The prediction. Students will learn how to think and talk about their writing. Students will demystify writing practice and be able to write even though the muse is out to lunch. . . .

The result. A confused student with major performance anxiety. You asked questions no one ever asked before which was disorienting. Before this class, creative writing class was intellectual recess. But the experiments you subjected me to resulted in better writing than I had done previously . . . [because they] moved my writing away from preconceived beliefs and into a place I defined as meaningful to me.

—Traci Wise

Scenes of Writing

1. I am walking as I write—my pen is my eye, my brain is my paper—whether my eyes are open or my brain is awake is of no consequence. I write as I walk. Both actions have their destinations, but that is of no importance . . . .

2. Who is there? Who is there? Sometimes, I am. Sometimes, unknown voices, faces. Sometimes memories . . . of people I wished I'd spoken with. I talk and write to them, at them, for them, with

Do you write in the kitchen, near the window facing east? Will the children soon wake up, and will they want a complicated breakfast—something toasted, something fried? Who will be driving them to school? What other writers' voices are making noise around you, and is this noise soothing or not?

Or do you write, instead, late at night in your local coffeehouse, buzzed on nicotine and caffeine and resolving, in the morning, to stop smoking?

Do you write in bed, letters to your great Aunt Willa, who lives in Nebraska and sends you local corncob crafts?

Do you write four hours undisturbed at your desk?

Now write for twenty minutes, and answer the following questions:

1. Where are you?
2. Who is with you?
3. What are you afraid of?
4. What do you want?
5. What are you writing?

Now imagine an ideal scene of writing, and write again for twenty minutes, responding to the same questions, only changed.

Reflections on the Writing Life: Part 3

When Mount St. Helens erupted, the sound of the blast was heard as far away as Canada, reports coming in from five hundred, seven hundred miles away. **BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.**

> them, behind them. . . . Words will often fail. It's like reading my words while holding coke bottles against your eyes. Just the gist.
> 3. I am afraid of something. That is a strange assumption. Pain is undesirable, but I do not fear it. It comes and I feel it. I must fear something. I know I must. . . .
> 4. What do I want? I want to quit smoking, have a strong mind that can focus at will, have a strong body that achieves every task that it is faced with. I want to smile more. I want to die before my lover does—and my parents, but not really because I want to live long. I want my eyesight back. I want to keep my teeth.
>
> —Sarah Loffler

> In fact, I had so internalized the [scene of writing] myth that I insisted I could only write in solitary silence (Baroque music being the only intrusion tolerated into my cloister); whereas, in reality I actually wrote and continue to write in public, amid noise and all sorts of interruptions.
>
> Acknowledging the multiple scenes of writing that my colleagues and I regularly inhabit was a liberating occurrence. . . . I discovered I was not alone in squeezing writing into the interstices between cooking a pot of soup, going to a baseball game, riding the bus to work, taking notes at a class lecture. Writing was part of my life, and my life could (and perhaps should) be in my writing.
>
> —Marion Heyn

But inside the blast zone itself, for sixty miles in every direction, an eerie hush prevailed. Blown down trees cracked and splintered apart. The water in Spirit Lake erupted and roiled. Hundreds of thousands of animals died. But for sixty miles in every direction from the center of the blast, the almost palpable sound waves set by the volcanic eruption itself disappeared into the heavens, arching out serenely to mark a perfect parabolic curve of silence.

Think of your "ideal scene of writing" as a perfect parabolic curve of silence, within which, as if for the first time, you may begin to hear your own self.

Imagine yourself in that ideal scene of writing, and write.

Like this: listen very carefully to the words in your own head as you may never have heard them before—their sound and rhythm, their balance and shape, their intonation and articulation, their imperative and their desire. Then write one page only out of this perfect parabolic curve of silence.

Just write.

Ideal Scenes of Writing (Excerpts)

The scene can be a room with many women writing a collective voice, of fear or joy. It can be me alone in a room. Me at the beach, me with someone across the table, me. I think the scene for me as woman is the voices inside myself, the voices outside myself. The voices there because there is an outside. The voices inside despite the outside. Hopefully my scene is a place which is peaceful. Hopefully my scene might help. My scene is here where I live, myself.

—Ann Holley

The writing comes out of the middle of full lives. It pours out of laundromats, out of dentists' offices with screams, out of salty harbors with sexy dreams. The writing is frightening, enlightening, delightful, sad, truthful, harmful, stupid, done to please, done to anger, done alone by a single candle blowing in the wind, done by committee with different colored pens and two-fisted green pencils on greasy brown paper lunch bags, done by a cat on the computer. The writing is never done. The writing is words, words, and more words and less than words can say and more. The writing is stuff and nonsense.

The writer is tired. The writer is asleep. The writer is tall, short, thin, stout, out to lunch. The writer has a moustache, a big bust, hairy legs and a fine ass. The writer can or cannot. The writer will or will not. The writer is cold or hot or hot and bothered. The writer is sistered, brothered, fathered, auntanduncled, thank you, Paul Simon. I have not been for a walk with you for weeks. The writer is sedentary. The writer sucks eggs. The writer welcomes you to her/his/its home. The writer is a troop of chimpanzees on typewriters: Roll over Beethoven and wee Willie Shakespeare better watch out!

The writing is sacred and profane. The writing is written. The writing is good and bad. The writing is written. The writing is done and undone. The writing is written. The writing is on the wall. Graffiti is sometimes bolder than salami. Graffiti is sometimes necessary. The writing on the wall is often a cry for help or a bugger off, you dead cow.

—Marion Heyn

Any writing scene I could make could not be contained in four walls—it may include four walls. It would not be stationary. And it is at this point very difficult to conceive. But I am creating. The writing lives of people who do write are helping to create new writing scene images. I may look to the lives of past writers to assist me in knowing what I may want to do, but ultimately it will be me myself who creates as I write if I choose to write. It is my writing life as I live it every day, and the writing lives of those I come into contact with that will create new images for me. Collaboration is important. As people who write, whether we are "writers" or not, we should be able to share, to look at each other's worlds and experiences. We will create as we go.

My writing scene would be wherever I write today. It would not be limited to one desk, or even one pen or pencil. I may write in a room alone but I would also write in other places, in a car, at work, outside, in a room with people around. Writing would not be separate from life—it would be part of life—influencing and influenced by life. Like food it might be a form of sustenance. Formality is not requirement. Sometimes I think people are kept from writing because of its formality—as if it can only be done when alone, in a room, at a desk, with great thought involved, and also because people believe that we can't engage in real thought on a daily basis while doing work. I make time and perhaps steal a few moments here and there to write down what I have worked through. But what I couldn't do is to say to myself OK sit down and write now, and then expect myself to create. A writing scene would have to be defined by where and when the writing is ever done.

—Kim Guthrie

We squat Indian-style in the soft earth, our fingers sift the black dirt, concentrate on the grains as they drip through, slip through: everything in our past is incredible. But what about the present? So what? The present is the workings of a watch, the coils and springs and hammers, precise and predictable, rhythmic. Ticking. Talking. Voice of the voices, not far away at all: stomach and throat. Stomach it, they say. If you can stomach it you can stand it. We writers stomach things. Stomach all things. Then we wiggle our fingers and see.

Sometimes we see, sometimes we go blind. We-e-o-no, we-e-o-no, we-e-o-no we-don't-know-anything. Fuck. We whine about the cost of paper, the cost of trees, about Art in America. Wimmin, I once saw it written that way, written by a poet printed in *Calyx* magazine. Wimmin, she said. Wimmin got the dangerous machines now—they go Backspace, they go Return, they go Shift, Start, Reset, Select, Break, Abort and Help. Wimin sitting on her ass thinking she got it all under control, she got it right there under her nose. She think: writing is fun, writing is easy, writing is fucking dangerous. Under her nose, all the letters of the greek alphabet. Under her nose, like the woman in the mission position, submission. She thinks: the world's going to lick her chin. Writing is power.

—Suzanne Ghiglia

So I guess I see this huge warehouse for writers. Big white walls and sections. You can be in one section or all of them or go from one to another. But anything can happen. We can speak individually to the same point or simultaneously. We can write on the big white walls. A wall of writing is a beautiful thing. It can be written over. The space may be fought over. Pencils may be thrown. All the rules may be broken. Someone's writing may get damaged by the childish behavior. This is the childish section. People who don't like it can stay away. Anything goes. You can deface, write over, take up a whole wall with one work, plagiarize. In fact, plagiarizing is encouraged in this scene, especially if you want to use it and then expand on it.

There is a section in this room where fame is possible. There is a committee of judges (men and women) or then a BIG Judge, a man, who sits at a table and looks bored. He will select a winner. You can write in this section. They are looking for literature; they are respectable; you are respectable. They guarantee they will read what you give them—that is they will read at least the first sentence. If you stay here, you can't complain you haven't been heard. The stakes are high and the tolerance is low. Here you write on clean white paper.

The sections without judges are "fun" writing. You have no chance of being discovered and made famous because there are no judges here. You do not have to write literature, although you may wish to. You can sound any way you want to sound. We might want to just ask questions—in writing of course. There are all kinds of scribbling on the wall here: words, sign language I can't read, puzzles. You can print your body, write your husband, home, etc., but you can not bring your husband to the place. No husbands or boyfriends. Is this right? Why do we want or need privacy? We don't. . . . Can't we let anyone in who comes? Maybe . . .

There must be a quiet room, too. A big room with water running through it where no one talks, and you can write or read but you don't yell at judges or throw papers or jump up and down. But, I ask myself, why should we be shut up in a warehouse, protected from the world? All sorts of possibilities: Janet Kauffman, writer and farmer. She probably has a writing pad on her tractor. Maybe she has a retreat house. Perhaps we need a Big House before moving to a small house in order to get rid of the judges and Rules in public, helping each other.

—Nancy Krusoe

11 Map 4: Poetics

> It was like a river bursting forth from a dam. All the years of pent-up desire flowing free, carrying logs and once-buried sediment and detritus of life, all rushing and roiling to the ocean, to the sea, all rushing to be. And it was like a miracle, as close to religion as I want to get, that this could happen just because someone said I could let it happen.
>
> —Margo McCall

Part 1: Discussion

A coming into being of a sense of who we are as writers is a first but not a final step in framing what we would have our writing be, or do, or how we would have it move through the world, what conversation we would hope it to engage.

I think here, perhaps to paraphrase Trinh T. Minh-ha, of the coming into being of the structure of the moment. A coming into being of a sense of who we are in the moment? Of how who we are in the writing moment becomes text, now?

I think too of the distinction she makes "between 'Write yourself. Write your body' and write about yourself, your body, your inner life, your fears, inhibitions, desires, and pleasures" (28). I think of who we are in the moment of writing self and how this is expressed in our writing, its formal aspects as well as its organizing structures, motivations, impulses, and perceptions.

If, as I have said, my goal as a teacher is to help students frame guiding questions to sustain writing over time, then what we do can never be about the thing that we already know how to do (for mastery is suspect, an ending-of-things, a closing down in final knowing), but about the next thing—the mystery, the challenge, the thing-you-can't-possibly-"get"-yet.

To find these things, we must look at interconnectivities, the complex network of synapses that often lie so embedded in the tacit assumptions we make about writing that we must train ourselves and our students to see them. Our students come to us full of ideas they do not even know they have, and in some respects the nature of the conversations we must begin to have with them is not unlike that of an archaeological dig. What we uncover, we examine and assess. Some is junk, and that we can discard. But what is left over, that odd assemblage of each student's voices, experience, language and aesthetics, that is what may constitute a certain elemental poetics. As teachers, we must train our students first to see the words that grow out of who they are, and then to name them, and then, as it were, to frame what comes next. As teachers, we must think of this next-coming-writing in terms of an engaged curiosity and passionate conviction. If writing is an act of faith, and so is teaching, then much of what we do is learn to listen.

In "What Is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari describe something they call the "deterritorialization of language," that is, the construction of a language that proceeds in opposition to a dominant one and comes to know itself only as a "stranger *within* [the other] language." This process of creating a "new" language for writing is one in which, they argue, language itself must be "brought slowly and progressively to the desert," driven by the following impulse:

> To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry. . . . [For] there is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor. (171)

Thus, they argue, we ought not to aspire to the common, the single, the familiar dream of assuming a "major function in language," but ought rather to "create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor."

A becoming-minor.

A becoming-minor.

If there is "nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor," then to become a minor is to become a major. "Coherence in contradiction," we know from Derrida, "expresses the force of a desire" (109). To become a major in the minor is—what, to become desire?

Again, we may ask whether this represents the distinction Barthes makes between "readable" and "writable" texts. Can we say that major texts are readable, because they are already known? *To give a syntax to the cry.* The writeable text, not yet written, a becoming-minor, a carving out of the syntax of self?

Again, we may wonder: does this become prescriptive? When does it become prescriptive? Ought we not allow students to choose?

This is about choosing. It is about recognizing that choices are all the time being made, alignments, affiliations. And it is about learning to recognize not just how we are proceeding—in what paths—but also what it means that we proceed along a certain path and not another, not any other.

Those of us who have been writing long enough not just to have learned to begin, when we need to, again, but to recognize as well the presage of such moments, know, too, that the more we know about this thing we still call writing, the harder and more complex it gets. This, too, is true of teaching.

One recent Santa Ana night in my graduate Creative Writing Studies class, I found myself pressing the broad and vexing question: What is it that should happen in a creative writing class? What is it that should happen, I kept asking.

The wind on such nights has an odd temperature, half warm, half cold, and it howls.

What should happen?

What I meant was, once we knew. It was easy. There was that text we all agreed on, the one we all wanted to write, the one that had me writing short and shorter sentences for years. Once it was easy.

Now?

One student said, "What is wrong with teaching how to write the publishable literary text?"

Another said, "Shouldn't we aspire to something new, something that has not been written yet?"

What should happen?

A becoming-minor.

When does what become prescriptive, I wonder?

I am not sure I know anymore, in any definitive way, what should happen, for what should happen is determined in the moment of each class becoming. But what I do know is that each student should have the opportunity to carve within her- or himself—slowly, delicately, and with infinite precision—a sense of language all his or her own. For Deleuze and Guattari also pose the question, *How many people today live in a language that is not their own?* as a problem for all of us who write.

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Not our own?

If we embrace, as a value, becoming an "immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language" (Deleuze and Guattari 169), then we will recognize, at once, the extent to which our students come to us so dispossessed of language that their efforts, at best, are mimicry. I will tell them, as I have told you, that writing proceeds from language, not image. I will insist that every sentence carries in it the imperative of its own next sentence. But for them to hear this, they must learn first to hear their own—this is where we would ordinarily say *voice*, but since I do not know what "voice" is, I will say—*what?*

Words. Syntax. Diction. Rhythm. Sound. Whisper. Sigh. Speech.

These days I look at my classes and marvel at how the white man is disappearing, not because there are no Caucasian males in them, but because these young men, who have never occupied a privileged center of anything stable or fixed, have come to know themselves in the context of my own all-too-familiar struggle out of silence into speech.

I know I'm not supposed to say so. I know it's still easier for them than for any black woman, Asian immigrant, Latino. I know this. And yet I also know that in the absence of any clear necessity, they are the last to articulate any sense of identity politics. Identity politics as a concept developed in opposition to them. They were, after all, the center, the norm.

Sometimes I think we no longer have a norm.

Sometimes I watch my sons' nearly all-white soccer teams play nearly all-Latino teams from farther east and I know better.

I know that in my older son's public middle school, only thirty percent of the students are white, but I also know about tracking and about how the faculty reflects inverse proportions.

A colleague recently walked away from an agitated conversation among students, remarking, "I'm not about to help them feel more comfortable about being white men."

Colleagues in other parts of the country remark that white men are still comfortable there.

California has outlawed affirmative action.

It is not so much that boys are women, too, in this context, if we're defining gender as position, as it is that positionality itself has been shifting. I think of the child whose mother overtly rejects her, as opposed to the child whose maternal rejection is coded, covert, and mystifying. If I'm being an apologist for white boys in my classes, so be it. And maybe I would make a different argument if the white boys in my classes were less working-class, more enfranchised, more privileged. But they're not. That pool is shrinking these days, and maybe it was never what we thought it was to begin with. For of course, if we could say at one point *all people in power are white men*, it never necessarily followed that *all white men have power.*

I read once about a woman's need and craving for some empty space around her as a space in which she can experience her own autonomy and come to know herself, who she is. I found the passage deeply moving, and read it to the man who would become my husband.

He said, "Why do women always have to complain about men?"

If identity politics developed in opposition to a dominant center, what happens to the center when it no longer dominates? Derrida never said there wasn't a center; he said the center was a function. If the white boys in my classes no longer or never did serve the function of organizing anything around their uncontested privilege, they too must know the interstices of intersecting languages that come together in them as gaps and silences, as dislocation, as struggle.

Of course I know that they can put a suit on and go places others in my classes, me included, never could. This is not insignificant; it matters. But that suit was never their birthright, and in their own inchoate yearning and conflict, they can learn as well to see the action of themselves as they are putting on the suit. Then they can put on the suit, or not, as they choose.

What I mean is that a pedagogy based on certain principles of identity politics need not be excluding. Instead, it can open up in all ways at once. If women trying to know, and then describe, their own experience eventually abandoned the project of defining themselves in relation to men, men trying to know, and then describe, their own experience may also learn to confront their own ideological constructedness in more open-ended ways.

To make the invisible visible. To give voice to what cannot be voiced.

So too in writing. For each of us a different struggle, but, for all, the same struggle to carve out a language against what we already know. Not to take the language ready-made and noisy, but to imagine ourselves instead inside that perfect parabolic curve of silence, within which we can imagine a poetics to accommodate the coming into being of ourselves in writing.

This is what will sustain writing for us.

This is what will enable us to begin, at last, to hear ourselves, and, as we listen, to carve out our own permissions to speak, and then, as we speak, to continue.

Is this an exercise? This is not really an exercise, but a way of thinking and framing the whole focus of a class. It can, of course, be turned into and used as an exercise, and so I include it here. But in a way, the concept of conceptualizing and naming one's own poetics is, as I described in Chapter 5 ("What Are We to Do with All These Rocks?"), the guiding framework behind the whole rest of this book.

So, in my classes—almost all my classes—I ask students to write "their poetics."

They ask me, what is a poetics?

In "How to Read," Tzvetan Todorov describes poetics as a third activity of reading—after projection and description—that seeks to describe the "constitutive elements" of a text or a body of texts. What makes them what they are, how we can identify, and know, and name them.

Regardless of how experienced or accomplished any writer is, these are not easy questions: What makes your writing *yours*, what marks it? Where can it be located, in what literary traditions? What does it do, what does it seek to do? How? Why? What *interests* you about it and in it? What, in Hugo's sense, "triggers" it? And then, can you describe it, formally, conventionally? How is it organized? Where and how does it interface with the other writing, with the culture? What kinds of questions does it raise?

As I say, these are not easy. I'm not sure I can answer them. Can you?

But I don't stop.

I ask my students: What gives you pleasure—in reading, in writing?

Where do you place yourself in all the conversation that is writing?

What shelf of the bookstore or library would you want to find your books on?

If your writing were a painting, what would it look like? What colors, what shapes? If it were music, could you sing it? If it were a house, how would you build it? Why isn't your writing a house?

What geography is it? Or maybe, geology: what are its basic formations?

Name your category. List its parts.

Animal? Vegetable? Mineral?

They ask me back, What is a poetics?

I say it is to write about writing, that this concept of poetics is not a stable thing, that it will change with time, that what drives your writing and interests you as a writer may be one thing now and something altogether different in five years, but it is a process, an evolution, a way of thinking about what we are doing and it starts now and it starts here. I say I am less interested in answers than I am in the process of trying to find them. I mean this.

Is this an exercise?

It is a writing assignment that can bring us closer to who we are as writers and one that bears repeating over time. Here is one way I have used it, in the Women and Writing class. Again, think gender here as a metaphor for position. Silence sticks in all of us in different ways.

Part 2: Writing Poetics, an Exercise

Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that, "A poetics gives [us] permission to continue" (156). For me this is an important concept because it articulates a response to the silence inscribed in us by the dominant discourses—silence, of course, in many forms. In the many-tongued, multivoiced discourses, the complex translations, we are forced to speak, which voices, for instance, are perpetually muted? Or the idealized forms we have internalized out of the patriarchal order—how do they mute and transmute us? How can we even know ourselves inside them?

A poetics, in DuPlessis's sense, enables us first to know ourselves, and then to find the terms with which to speak ourselves. It is at first a slow and awkward process, because of how much we will have forgotten in the coming into being of our social/cultural selves. And what we remember, what words are there for it? Is there even a syntagm to contain the other side of our silence?

But of course, to continue requires first that we begin. And beginning depends upon discovering what it is that allows us to speak. For DuPlessis, a feminist aesthetic might be characterized by contradiction and nonlinear movement, many-centeredness, anti-authoritarian ethics, antithesis to dominant values, porosity, fluidity, doubling, retelling the same, emotional vulnerability, blurring—between art and life, social creativity and "high" art, one's journal and one's poem, the artifact and the immersion in the experience—multivocality, and so on. These are traits many feminists have recognized and talked about, in one way or another, but DuPlessis's work is especially interesting because of the way it reflects in its actual form the characteristics it describes. And then, true to its form, it undermines its own conclusions, refusing even to engage in any reassuring model of male certainty.

Mary Jacobus says we know a female order exists because women feel themselves attempting to describe it, but, because of how they are constructed, they can describe it only in negative terms, like Kristeva—"That's not it. That's still not it." Part, probably, of a feminist aesthetic is not to know, and to be OK not knowing, not being certain, anyway. But what else might it involve? What other possibilities for being and being undone, I wonder.

In this assignment, I'd like you to look at your own life, never mind theory or what others have said, and ask yourself what you have forgotten, what you have not said (and all the ways you have not said it) in your attempts to accommodate yourself to dominant discursive models. Think of this assignment as a personal archaeological dig, looking back—and forward—to what, in an ideal state of the world, would give you permission to continue, yes, but also, more simply—and much more complicatedly as well—begin. Write about your writing—what it is, what you would have it be, what makes it yours. Like DuPlessis, I'd like you to model your writing formally after the very principles it is trying to express.

Much of this you will discover as you go along, as you write your poetics, which is also writing.

Part 3: Student Writing

Manifesto, by Arash Saedinia

I. The Politics of Identity

Other. More than a social security number, more than the clothes I wear or the food I eat, "other" has played an integral role in defining me. From graduate applications to job forms, medical questionnaires and census surveys, I have been relegated to marking the "other" box in reference to my ethnicity. I have reaped the rewards of a system and society full of opportunities despite explicit and institutionalized racism. The duality of American society and its institutions simultaneously enmeshes with the very duality of my identity as an Iranian-American. I cannot and will not deny my bond to Iranian culture (or for that matter, the color of my skin) nor will I ignore my life and belief in America. Meanwhile, I have discovered that the duality of my identity precludes immediate acceptance in either society. I see this state of exile, the state of being "neither here nor there," as an obstacle and an opportunity. An obstacle, in that I am forced to endure symbolic and explicit marginalization. An opportunity, in that I embody a social, cultural and material perspective that supersedes insidious and reductivist images of Iranians and Iranian-Americans.

Though I am a member of an ethnic minority here in the United States, I have never been afforded opportunities on the basis of my ethnic status. Because the majority of Iranian immigrants are educated professionals (engineers, doctors, etc.) and/or successful entrepreneurs, Iranian-Americans receive little, if any attention in

Poetics Excerpts

You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. . . .

Speaking is a privilege. Silence is a right.
Tell me a story, grandma. I don't know any stories, go to sleep.
—Traci Wise

And this is how a voice is silenced. And this is how a voice persists, transmogrifying into something recognizable, someone else's, not my own. But in the seamless flow of words, the glass that keeps the bubbles of a dark witch's recipe from exploding, if you listen closely you can hear. Just listen.
—Margo McCall

1. To toss onto the blank white page that raw stain of truth in story that transcends the historical (or created) event from which it arose, yet is still inexorably a part of it.
2. To find the truth within the telling of a story that has nothing at all to do with historical truth. A truth that isn't a function of historical events.
3. Reflect on language—language as instrument of thought becoming language as

terms of minority status. Ironically, the same society that has repeatedly viewed and portrayed Iranian-Americans negatively, consistently classifies Iranians or "Persians" as "Caucasians." Politically and in legislative terms, we are yet another subset of an extraordinarily complex "white" category. Iranians, like so many ethnic groups in the country, remain "hidden minorities." Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Philippine and Samoan immigrants are all thrown under the banner of "Asian" ethnicities, thus oversimplifying the complexity and diversity of peoples not just from nation to nation, but also within countries. Some might argue that a few extra lines on a census form or application for work would be needlessly cumbersome, but the importance of such a move is two-fold. Symbolically, representation is a key to the self-esteem of individuals and collectivities. Ignorance and false stereotypes of Iranians force American youth to eschew their heritage and claim various other ethnicities in social settings. Furthermore, the very purpose of such questions on forms is to gauge the size, background and socioeconomic status of groups for legislative and institutional use. Thus, more specific information on our ethnic communities is essential to greater social and political inclusion. Forms matter. But what we say and do matter as much as who we are or claim to be.

Inclusion and representation are the principles that have guided millions of immigrants to this country. It is essential that we remember we are a nation of immigrants (with the significant exception of Native-Americans). Despite tragic legacies of racism, behavioral and structural violence, America has been a place of opportunity for determined individuals and communities. Amidst an increasingly confused and violent international setting (Bosnia, Rwanda, Chiapas, East Timor) I am constantly reminded of the many liberties

essence of thought, for its own sake as thought.

—Rhonda Hakimovich

INHALE:

. . . And isn't it interesting that words float from our mouth on breath? We are able to tell stories because we can breathe.

Here is a point of difficulty then: is *writing* a faithless action, a shambles-maker of humanity, or is writing an amazing thing that we do when we hold our breath and dive somewhere in between the flat planes that hedge—in the egg, and the curve of the egg itself?

—Susannah LeBaron

Recently I began to let myself feel pain. It's unpleasant but apparently necessary.

—Desiree Wold

But maybe now is time to take a pickax, to break apart the rock and see inside. And in the rock maybe I'll hear a voice, and perhaps the voice I hear will be my own. What is confusing is the cacophonic conundrum, so many sounds washing in like waves. Are they me or someone else, or nothing, how can you ever really know for sure?

—Margo McCall

Why do I write what I write when I write?

—Mary Marca

I am writing a poetics, but really I am writing myself. Is a poetics and opportunities I enjoy as a US Citizen. As a student and educator, writer and artist, I have fought to establish my own space as well as a space for the representation of the various collectivities within which I claim membership. A key element of representation as I envision it, is the process by which a positive dialogue is constructed. In other words, an essential aspect of representation and interaction involves examining and exploring the differences and commonalities within and between groups.

As an anomaly to the black/white/brown/yellow or Caucasoid/Negroid/Mongoloid pseudoscientific constructions that emerged in the 19th Century and persist today, I am constantly asked my race/ethnicity, particularly outside Los Angeles proper (where Iranians are a visible minority). If it isn't "What are you?" it's, "Are you (plug in an array of ethnicities)?" I find myself unable to readily answer such questions. I am uneasy with parsimonious labels. As a child growing up in the San Fernando Valley, I remember using the term "greyboy" to describe myself and friends that weren't black or white. Early on, my closest friend was the child of a Taiwanese mother and half black, half Russian father. I recall having been bussed with him and a few others to a Pacoima elementary school in the fourth grade, where all but a handful of students were Latino. He acted as a sort of middleman attempting to interpret my identity to a steady stream of children who immediately assumed I was Latino and understood Spanish. These experiences, the interaction of necessity, readily inform my search for an identity.

II. Tools & Meanings

My identity, subject of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction (though not necessarily in that order or simple cycle) is one aspect of a larger search for meaning amidst the hyper saturated, chaotic,

a self? Is it our voice? If it is *why* we write—that is personal and reflects myself. If it is *what* we write—that is personal and reflects myself. If it is *when* or *where* we write—that is also personal. If it is *how* we write—even more so. And if it is *why*? That is most personal of all and I can not share that right now because I am too busy starting to feel the pain that has been my writing for way too long now. It just comes out the holes somewhere someway and if you write, it is uncontainable.

—Desiree Wold

Speak to me. Why don't you ever speak to me? Speak loudly. Look at me when I speak to you. Speak softly. Speak up, I can't hear you. The words are caught in my throat. What did you say? You spoke too soon. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me. Never say never. Speak softly but carry a big stick. "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (Foucault) What difference does it make who is writing? Who is writing? Who should be writing? Who hasn't been writing? How many have been written off?

My grandma could have been a concert pianist if she hadn't met and married my grandpa.

Speaking is a privilege. Silence is a right.
Tell me a story, grandma. I don't know any stories; go to sleep.

—Traci Wise

post-modern world I inhabit. By "meaning," I don't wish to suggest "universal truth(s)" or undiscovered axioms. Indeed, I am interested in questions, suggestions, processes by which sense is or isn't made. My education has always been profoundly interdisciplinary, particularly as an undergraduate. I have learned that specialization is not nearly as valuable as the rigorous study of all disciplines, that ecological models and meta-evaluations are essential to making sense of anything. This belief in interdisciplinary study has paid off, in that the intellectual tools I have assembled transcend any one discipline or system. Just as a good adjustable wrench is valuable in many mechanical projects, the discovery and understanding of constructed histories, languages, sciences, the very study of epistemologies and revolutions, have been useful to the project of critical thinking, rigorous analysis, and fruitful creative work.

III. Writing

It is in writing, in creating, that the collision and interplay of intellectual tools and substantive experience is most apparent. Of course, there isn't any easy delineation between hammer, nail, and wood to draw a simple analogy. I have always been a reader, preoccupied by children's books, comic books, novels, poems, magazines, encyclopedias, journals, etc. I am in one sense the sum of those pages. Yet only very recently did I begin to accept myself as a writer. This acceptance began the night I couldn't sleep, physically could not rest, because words were demanding to be written. I remember that night vividly. I remember the position of my bed in relation to my desk, the discomfort and agitation, the relief once I had finished writing. That night I emerged a writer of necessity, writing became a necessity. Since then, writing has been an inescapable aspect of my identity. I dream of poems I have written, I keep notebooks filled with words, constructed

The vision I once embraced featured a world gone mad. A dark place where thugs would kill you for a dime, where resources were so scarce and institutions so eroded that there was nothing recognizable left. I was waiting for the end of the world. I waited and it didn't come, so I joined its onward flow.

—Margo McCall

Why fiction? Because in fiction I can hide.

—Mary Marca

INHALE: . . . Writing as held breath: Just imagine. To be able to *hold* breath. . . . I had been wondering where all the fingers fit into this, and now I have decided that fingers are the process of differentiation. Digit divers. Hold the breath, then dive down with your ten fingers, pull it apart, explore it, card it and spin it, put words on it, love it, and ultimately, as we must, leave it, and come up for air. We are breathing things if nothing else, but we are sometimes holders, cradlers of that breath, divers of the gap, explorers of the insane, faith point of the egg.

—Susannah LeBaron

4. To strip away the familiar patterns, like an onion skin as it stings and tears, and write from the inside out, then back without the construction of another skin. Skinless, or skinned writing. This I experience as extreme confusion, finding myself lost in a core of a story that I am writing,

phrases, snippets. Paradoxically, writing has become exponentially more difficult. Increasingly, I have come to view language as an essentially inadequate and incomplete tool of expression. This has forced me to examine expression itself, the dynamics of what is seen, thought, meant, gathered, suggested, said. It isn't difficult to accept writing as a verb. It is very difficult in some sense to accept what is written as a verb, though that is my current understanding. A story, a novel, a poem is never finished. A narrative, a poem is what is made of it, not simply how it is made or why or with what intention. There is an incredible freedom involved in these discoveries, a new sense of language, of expression. Here, then is an outline/guideline that informs my writing and approaches a manifesto (of sorts):

1. I believe in paradox, oxymoron, contradiction, in addressing the crises, dilemmas, anomalies, and bedlam around me. I will meet noise with noise, because noise can only understand noise, because it's noisy inside and out.
2. I believe in energetic language, language that moves, language for language's sake. I believe in rhythm, the musicality of language. From this language, the poem will emerge.
3. Poems are verbs, they are everything and nothing. Poems aren't on the pages of some book, a poem is a solid backbeat, a child's gaze, a dog's tail wagging, an unexpected kiss.
4. All that is written matters in that writing matters. Put the pen to paper. Respect the page. Regard it. Bless it with suggestions, ejaculations, farts, burps, incomplete thoughts, half-baked ideas, lists, doodles, everything, anything. I believe in collage, in pastiche.
5. Language is inadequate. To express is to fail. To write is to fail. There is beauty in failure. There is success in failure.
6. I am. I be. I was. I will.
7. All I can do is write. Assess and reassess. And write. Then write.

and having to push my way out again through the wall I spent several pages building.

—Rhonda Hakimovich

I am also writing to place language and landscape in relation to each other.

—Desiree Wold

5. To write shorter sentences.
6. To write very, very long, page long sentences.
7. To say something that justifies the use of ink and paper, or doesn't use them.
8. To thread words through the space in a story's eye without fraying the words or blinding the eye.

—Rhonda Hakimovich

Words have their own power.

—Margo McCall

EXHALE:

. . . 3) Death is the end, and it is the ultimate unknown. Maybe the still/beating heart of breath is that unknown, and all around death swirls breath, rising and falling, collapsing and increasing, forever rounding, rounding, and faithing. And maybe when we hold our breath and dive-write deep into the charged gaps between egg and plane we are diving for the mystery of the heart of breath. If we ever really find it we do not return.

—Susannah LeBaron

9. To know what "burrowing" is for seven consecutive days.

—Rhonda Hakimovich

What will sustain my writing? Yes, I know—the words, but which ones? Mimicry, not me. Or maybe you're right—I don't know all the words, but that's supposed to help me? " . . . for mastery is suspect, an ending-of-things, a closing down in final knowing." Thanks for understanding. Yes, I am a mute, but how long have I been writing the way I was told to do so? That is silence. Like the one in a family of eight and I'm the middle child. Look at me. Watch me put each of their broken glasses/stories on my breasts . . . I'm bleeding . . . Look at me, I'm writing.

I think each word pulled from my throat brings me closer to my darkness, mystery, identity. Yes, I'm bi-cultural and bi-lingual. Mexican-American. No, not both. It's either or. Coherence in contradiction. Whose language am I speaking? But I'm legal. Stop looking at my skin—wanna write a story? Yes, I can read yours—in English. Would you like a translation? An order from a Mexican restaurant?

I'd like to create my own language. Something new.

For now, I can only offer my short, short stories. An experience at the moment—a becoming moment? "Writing proceeds/(becomes)from language, not image." But I only know to think in pictures. Remember Saussure: "language is a system of signs." Oh yes, and then they said, "All words are signs, but not all signs are words." More contradictions—I know, I know, desire. I desire to write, a new kind of writing for me.

The signifier and the signified.

I think, whenever I stop writing the old, instilled way, I will write a new kind of story. Will my new story be what the others are not? In terms of language? Will I stop repeating the same sentence. Mimicry? Repeated stories from generation to generation?

How much will I disrupt language? Will I? I have more questions than I do answers and my stories keep getting shorter. Yes, they're about my family—I don't know how to write science fiction. Write what you know. But it's what I don't know that I find most intriguing.

I will pick up their pieces and continue to write. I will pick up my pieces and discover how to write.

—Josie Torres

My poetics, now, December 1997.
        Joy.
                Sex.
                        Violence.
                                Love
                                        in
                                                Families.
Much more than one plucked string,
        families are simultaneous multiple notes, rich and full,
                        All dissonance and consonance.

I write for:
        Resonance across the family of wo/man,

Struggle and triumph; anger and healing; birth and rebirth;
grandfather/father/son/husband/man,
grandmother/mother/daughter/wife/woman;
human being,
being human, inhuman, passionate, compassionate;
multi-facet, multi-voice; speak, repeat, sound, resound, reverberate,
verbalize,
realize, real, and reel;
see, visualize, vision, revision
revise reality.
revisit reality,
realize reality,
realize, visualize, verbalize,
my reality.
—Mary Marca

Today's Manifesto, by Rebecca Baroma

This theory crap is wearing me out.

I am bending over and being fucked. But I like being fucked. Especially really deep, from behind, and when I'm not looking. It feels good.

Is that what I desire? To feel good? What makes me feel good? All that is beautiful. All that is beautiful is sad—but that's what makes it beautiful. It's good to be sad. It makes me feel good.

I am at school. I strut in my Puma, Nike and Adidas gear. Woohoo, do I look cool! Hakim asks me where I got the shoes before he asks me, "What's up?" "Look at me, mother-fucker!" I want to scream, "not my damn shoes!" But I don't. I cover my mouth and giggle. We hang out.

My emaciated cousin from the island of Mindoro asked me how much a pair of Air Jordans were.

Don't talk to me about struggle, I tell him. Everyone knows about your "struggle." How can anyone not know? You've been oppressed longer than I have. I care, that's why I know. "What about me?" I want to say. I am in college and I still haven't learned shit. Sure I can ask Professor Chairman Mr. Man. But I can't be the only one. Alrighty then, Ms. Model Minority, are your parents alumni or do you want to start a revolution? I don't have any energy for anything except for sex. It's not in my nature, "our" nature to start shit. You wanna fuck?

In the Philippines I've seen my cousin (a different cousin. in fact a righteous, macho asshole.) fuck my aunt. It was funny at the time. I think it turned me on. I

> was only seven. I'm glad I don't have a big brother. I wouldn't trust him.
>
> > I remember going to church feeling guilty and dirty for what I saw and what I felt. I decided to crucify myself. I was a sinner. I had to deal. Catholic school, catechism, and mass every Sunday was punishment enough. I knew I needed more, so I could learn my lesson, so I could be in heaven with my ancestors, so I could stop feeling so damn guilty. So I kept on sinning.
>
> "Cum on," I tell Amir, "just take a bite." He shakes his head in refusal but does so anyway. Then I tell him, "No, honey, not in the car. I have my standards, you know. A lady's got to draw the line somewhere." "Dragon Lady!" he spits out. "Who me?" I purr while a torch of a flame flies out of my mouth and burns his goatee.

I see my brothers and sisters hang out at the same stinky corner. It smells like fish and rice and makes me hungry when I pass. I don't look at them. I get this weird vibe. I never talk to them. I can imagine what they'll tell me: get over it. I just want to say, "Looky here, it's Frankie and Annette." They went "Back to the Beach" and forgot about Bataan. I am still marching to the death. I will march till I die—again.

> I cover my mouth and giggle. I remain silent. I agree. I do it out of duty before love. I am born in the West. I die (and have died many times) in the West. I seek rebirth in the East. I am murdered, mutilated, destroyed in the east. My roots are planted in a "banga" but it is in my house in Encino. I need new soil. I need some Miracle Gro.

In third grade, about 1974, I was called a "jap," a "chink," ("stinky-chink," to be exact), and a "gook." Boy, did I get mad. I wanted to scream, "I am a fob, an F-O-B!!! I am fresh off the boat!! NOW GET IT STRAIGHT!!!!"

> My best friend hates it when she sees a black man with a white woman—especially a blonde one. The instance happens a lot so I hear it all the time. My Asian-American mouth says nothing. My post-colonial-societal mind goes wild.

Aaahh, the library—it's so . . . so . . . big, so cold. I wouldn't mind being a librarian. I will be surrounded by the accumulation of this culture and some others as well. Will it all be gone? Art moves with culture. Words will be floating in the air soon, traveling to those who can stare at a screen long enough. In the meantime I will write. I will not fall behind because I will not get caught up. Or, if I'm lucky, I will sell out some day. It's inevitable. But it's all so beautiful.

A letter to my lover:
Pedro, my love, you are a passionate beast, I know. But you are also very macho-machismo. There is only room for one contradictory fool and that "fool" is me. I must leave you for another. But since we are both silly fools maybe we will get lost in forgetfulness, come back together, and maybe, then, I will be your macho lover.

Me:
Growing up in a home-grown dictatorship has affected my methods of communication. I talk but I can never really make sense. I cry, whine, curse, complain, get frustrated. I write and I get lost. It feels good to get lost. I speak simply: no big words, no long sentences, no real rules. I need to learn some "rules" because someday I will have to explain myself. Hopefully, someday. But now, I'm lost. It feels good. When I find myself it will be scary. But I'll get used to it.

I'm being fucked (or is it being made love to?) by my professor. I want to choose anonymity because I don't want to explain. I shouldn't have to. I don't want to tell anyone because of the fear of being misunderstood. This ambivalence, my humility, is there a theory behind this too? Call me Suzy Wong and limit my humanity. It doesn't do anyone any good.

December 2, 1996

Part 4: A Poetics I Wrote Once for My Class

A Declaration, of Sorts, of the Moment

(Like Just Another Hill)

I am a writer and I am a teacher. In the same breath. But yet, even so, it is easier for me to say that I'm a teacher than a writer (a diffident ambivalence I share with other women writers), and for this reason I consider my main pedagogical purpose (this is about writing) to be to open up the struggle between speech and silence, which takes so many forms for students.

"A poetics," DuPlessis says, "gives permission to continue" (156).

Even just to write, that is the first thing. To learn that a person never simply speaks—there has to be a context in which that person feels privileged to speak. To learn to see that context as an open space into which you, as the writer, may disappear and open your whole body up into language.

If I do not say "I" it is because I learned from Barthes that "language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person'" ("Death" 169), and that this empty subject pronoun suffices, all alone, to hold language itself (slippery, slippery) together. (But not really all alone. And I am more than the instance saying "I," and so are you.)

To hold language and self together (and text, and narrative, and grace) through writing, which represents desire, which is the stitch that holds things together. To be inside the stitch that is writing, a whole different order of being than whatever comes before it, or after. If the stitch is a suture, to nonetheless heal the wound by the very same act that makes it.

If I do not say "I" it is because in the act of writing I am someone altogether different, knowing language as an act, like a dance I am inside of, inside writing.

But writing is never and always about me. To make a distinction, as Trinh T. Minh-ha says, between writing "about [the] self" and "writing [the] self" (28). To learn to recognize, as she would have it, the structure of the moment, even as it comes into being in the moment itself.

The act is structurality, coming into being, which I am, who I am, in the moment writing it. An articulation of my own sentence-sound, like something sung, if I only had a voice.

If I only had a voice.

It was such hard work in my writing, finding any voice at all, opening up the stubborn fist of my muteness. As a teacher, remembering silence, I have students write poetics or manifestoes in order that they should begin to negotiate theirs. Their silences, I mean. (And this, too, is about writing.)

A "poetics" describes the constitutive elements of a body of work, the work that is my body. A "manifesto" is a public declaration of intention or principle, especially of a political nature. But never stable, never a fixed thing, but, like writing itself, multiple, shifting, porous and fluid. To know it even as it comes into being.

One night my students said, "What do you mean?" (How can I know what I mean?)

I said, "Let's find out," and we wrote for ten minutes. Together.

This is what I wrote, those ten minutes, one night as the others also wrote, reminding me of Nancy Krusoe's ideal scene, a big room full of writers, all writing:

> *That writing should engage "the world" in such a way as to render the invisible visible.* (It is never and always about me, but I am sick of

writing that does not place itself in history, that does not turn at least an ear to where we are, to the children who once were infants in our arms but now, with confidence that stuns us, stride out into the world—kindergartners, middle schoolers, college students, grown-ups—to find it exactly as we have made it and held it, for an instant, in our writing.)

That writing should transgress multiple textual boundaries to raise questions about its ontological status—how we know it, and, through it, ourselves. What it is. (OK. A piece of writing in the world has to be, luminescent, what it is, a piece of writing, but it also has to point to itself, causing us to know it differently, to point and to say *look at me, I am writing,* even as we keep forgetting in the lure of its luminescence. For not to know itself as what it is, as writing, is to link itself to the whole history of writing, which, posing as the instance of its own authority, has worked to silence all the rest of us. Not to link ourselves to this silencing.)

That the boundaries between personal and public in writing are porous.

That paradox and contradiction confound binarism and enable us to embrace a both/and vision. (What we know from Derrida: "Coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire" [109]. It is about writing. It is about desire. Writing is the sheer force of desire by which things hold together, despite all odds and contradictions. Anti/gravitational. And spinning.)

That writing should invite the reader to engage in a nonhierarchical conversation in which the disruption of familiar hierarchies should first seduce, and then transform. (Now there's a contradiction for you: I, who cannot say in public with any ease at all that I'm a writer, should aim, nonetheless, for the fundamental transformation of the reader. To lead the reader through the gully of the text in such a way that it may be known as not anything, quite, that has been known before. It cannot, therefore, be completely foreign territory, because, oh just because that is a violence and I am not a violence. I am not a violence, and neither is writing a violence. Also, to respect absolutely the reader as we seek, nonetheless, to open out new ways of being in the text. So the writing is both familiar and not. The writing is a lure, where even you, even I, even she or he and we cannot know beforehand where it takes us. Takes us up.)

To take us up.

That writing should move through the world on the underside of things, making noise, a flutter and a pulse. What is not down on any map. (True places never are.)

That writing should help me (here I am, in my person) *organize experience and the world.* (An organizing principle. Not just to frame a way of understanding things, but something that you do in life, that grounds your every day that you can make for it, between the laundry and the dishes and baseball games and homework, the papers and committees and appointments, in the early morning, late at night, with earplugs in and skateboards crashing just outside the very window that you write at. Oh, the beauty of it, the moment when life clears out around you and you disappear into the language of the moment.)

That story, too, should disappear into language, inseparable from it, and yet completely necessary and compelling. Story embraced as an absolute good.

Pleasure.

To tell my family story. (Who else is going to tell it?) To inscribe it in the memory of our being.

Being in the body writing.

Pure sentence-ness. (The coming into being of the structure of the moment, which is the sentence doubled over many times: your sentence, which is your very own, is the structure of your narrative in the moment.)

The warp and weft of weaving, warp and weft, over and under: writing as weaving.

Writing as weaving yourself in the moment of the text you are weaving, not about the self, but the self itself, in the moment, weaving. It is about weaving.

I want a loom instead of a computer for my stories, but in the absence of a loom, my computer will do.

François Camoin, who was my dissertation adviser in Ph.D. school (I am a teacher) tells me that my work is "elitist," and that this is the one thing I have yet to accept about it. I tell him, yeah, and in the thirties, they thought that to write for the masses you had to use all little words. He grins and shrugs, as if he really does know better, and I love him anyway, for everything he taught me.

A student (a seasoned politico, well into her fifties) once described me as the most democratic person she had ever met.

Writing is democracy, not hierarchy. (And I know, of course, that I am not supposed to say so, that art, of course, is art, and that what we are supposed to do is to bow down to it. Bow down.) In it, we are all, every one of us, equal.

Listen, can you hear the voices?

Recently, I took my children to visit Taliesen West, Frank Lloyd Wright's desert home and school of architecture. (Narrative is knowledge.) The cactus was in bloom, and the lying-down house that he built there arced over the floor of the desert like just another hill.

From our tour guide we learned that Frank Lloyd Wright would tell his students, "Don't go through life with your mind like a closed fist. Open your mind, and the ideas will come."

I raise my fist high and then open my palm. Air kisses it.

We learned, too, that Wright considered three geometric shapes above all others: the square, for integrity; the circle, for continuity; and the triangle, for aspiration. "Learn these three," he said, "and you will learn the perfect grammar of form."

To learn the perfect grammar of my form. In and through writing. Over and under, warp and weft.

If I only had a voice: *hear me sing.*

Which is what I tell my students, in order that I may also hear them sing—palms open and raised to the air.

12 Atlas: Course Design

The night I heard Al Young speak about writing (see Chapter 7, "Maps to Anywhere"), he also talked with some ambivalence about the ascent of creative writing inside departments of English during the past quarter century. Despite the opposition of much of the rest of the discipline, the numbers, he allowed, were impressive. Students don't flock to classes in structuralism, eighteenth-century drama, or medieval romance, he said; they jam creative writing courses instead.

As an undergraduate, I mostly did not study "creative writing," though during my final term I did take a workshop, which landed me, in time, at Stanford. Because I thought I knew I was not smart enough or talented enough to be a writer, I studied literature instead. These days, things are different. At my school, a full third of undergraduate English majors declare creative writing as their option, another third choose our teaching credential option, and the remaining third opt for traditional literary study. Young's ambivalence, one I share, derives from basic skepticism about the value of having students focus on writing before they have had the opportunity to learn very much to write about. But if we think our students' work will benefit from something more substantial than the inchoate urge to express themselves, then it is our obligation to see to their education. While classic student-text-centered creative writing workshops may have much to recommend them, they may also devolve, over time, to myopic self-absorption. Surely we can devise other ways to direct the curiosity of students away from themselves to the world.

When Young remarked on the apparent student preference for creative writing classes over those in structuralist theory, I thought: yes, but my creative writing classes *are* classes in structuralist theory.

This is the first most basic move, to integrate the disparate concerns of our larger discipline into our specialized classes. We know it most immediately in the form of the old creative writing lament that writers must be readers and that students mostly aren't. So we add reading lists to our classes, loaded with our favorite authors. We train our students to read the way we did. We study literary models, other writers and their muses, what's out there.

A common variation, one I used when I first started teaching: in order not to overwhelm the students with the "greatness" of the texts we were reading, I used Pushcart Prize books and literary journals. Students found some and did their own research. We "workshopped" the stories, just like our own.

But, perhaps because of my own experience, literary models made me skittish. Students can't help but receive them as idealized, and while we all know imitation is a great way to learn it is finally only useful if we can learn, as well, to know it as a practice.

We must ask not only, *Does this work?* but also: *According to what criteria or aesthetic, and in which tradition?*

We must ask not only, *Is this good?* but also: *What is good? Where does it come from? Who decides? Why?*

Much of this book has addressed the variety of ways in which these concerns can be integrated into our classrooms. Here I would like to suggest that there may be ways to organize the classrooms themselves to focus attention on some of these issues.

In Chapter 5 ("What Are We to Do with All These Rocks?"), I described the evolution of a particular creative writing course based on feminist literature and theory. This principle of intradisciplinary cross-pollination is wide open for play and exploration, and the basic structure of our courses is so flexible as to accommodate multiple variations.

The creative writing major at CSUN consists, in part, of a critical theory course, a course in the theory and practice of a particular genre, a multicultural literature course, three workshop courses and a senior seminar in the writer's genre. Recently we have added, as well, a special topics course in creative writing, in which the teacher determines an area of study around which to focus the writing questions and concerns of the course.

Writing based on feminist literature and theory. What opens out?

Science and writing. Multidiscursive writing? Science fiction?

To this end, I am this year playing with a "fact of the week" project, where each student collects facts from other disciplines in their original discourse. In the end, we compile a course book of facts.

Memoir. Life writing. How to tell a true story, maybe?

Hypertext. Technology. What's possible? What's next?

Regionalism and writing. Where are we?

This list, of course, is flexible and open-ended. And it does not have to mean that the writing in the course is prescribed. What it means is the writer is expected to engage certain issues external to the writer's self and to imagine a way they might enrich her or his writing.

But there are other ways to imagine reconstructing our classes so that they work to focus writerly curiosity and attention in interesting ways. What follows are descriptions of three courses I've taught at CSUN, which I include not as models but as prompts. My own goal is to explore the wide variety of ways we can turn the lens in our workshops to move the writers in them a little bit away from what they already know.

The first—Creative Writing Studies—is not, strictly speaking, a "workshop," but is our core requirement for the creative writing M.A., designed to examine the theoretical, poetic, institutional, and pedagogical concerns of creative writers. It is, by definition, intra-, and often inter-, disciplinary. In it, we study theory and practice, and we also write.

The second and third descriptions represent different designs for the same course, Advanced Narrative Writing. The second, a more or less standard workshop, attempts to structure questions of organization and radical revision. The third reflects on how our thinking about the ontological status of the text affects and informs its production.

These course descriptions are just as I distributed them in class, minus grading policies, which are inevitably flawed. I don't say much about grading in this book, because I still suffer it every semester and don't believe there are any easy solutions. In general, my strategy is always the same. I don't grade individual work. I encourage students to see me with concerns. I set things up so that if they do all the work in the class and fully engage themselves in it, they get a B. If they don't, they get a lower grade. And if at least some of their work is truly exceptional, they get an A. What I call exceptional these days is "writing that is aware of its own conventions and invokes them with a high degree of complexity, authority, and grace." If both students and I sometimes suspect that this is simply code for "good writing," at least it isn't code for "what I like."

English 652: Creative Writing Studies

Course Description:

English 652 is a graduate seminar in the theoretical, professional, institutional, and poetic concerns of creative writers, especially (but not exclusively) as they may be experienced in academic settings. We will be concerned with defining who we are and would be in the context of an institution that knows and regulates itself according to strict if unspoken rules. Let's call the institution "Creative Writing in America." Let's call ourselves, for lack of any other better term, "creative writers."

This course will ask what it is we mean, exactly, by "creative," what we mean by "writing," and how the activity inscribed by those terms is situated in the world.

You there, dressed in black, scribbling in the coffee house, with multiple holes punched all over your body and unnatural-colored hair. You, in your library carrel. You, before your first creative writing class, teaching what you thought you knew before. You, pitching your screenplay. You, with your ink-stained fingers, your laptop computer, your handmade recycled papers.

I, who never meant to end up here.

What do we all share in common? How can we help each other move forward, not only in our writing, but in our writing lives?

OK. This course defines the (professional)[1] concerns of creative writers as: theoretical, institutional, and aesthetic. Or, that's what we'll be looking at, at any rate.

Theoretical: That is, as pertains to theory. Or how has the changing configuration of English Studies, especially as it has been transformed by theory, affected our identity and practice? Some creative writers think theory gives them hives. Others, once introduced to its elegant principles, embrace it absolutely and start talking like physics textbooks.[2] Somewhere between the one extreme and the other lies a productive space where theory can enrich and extend what it is we do and how we know and experience it.

Don't you think?

Institutional: The lives of creative writers are affected by all kinds of institutional concerns. Academic options. Publishing. How to make our (odd) way in the world. Pedagogies.

Since most of us have, to some extent, been "made" by our experiences in academic institutions, we will focus on questions of pedagogy. What was our own experience in school? How else might we define our teaching?

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[1] The parentheses are ironic. Creative writers, for the most part, prefer to think of themselves as "artists," somehow outside the inhibiting constraints of a "profession." "Professionalism" contaminates the purity of what we do. And so on.

Except, of course, that everything we do takes place in the context of writers writing in their various capacities in the world. And those capacities define what is possible and what lies outside what is already known as possible, what is not yet known. Hence, a profession, or constellation of professions, where we must come to know ourselves.

[2] Another irony, in this case from a more personal lexicon of rejection letters. My own. A literary press recently rejected a book of mine by saying that their preferences did not run toward short fiction that read like a "physics textbook." Since my fiction is more concerned with natural histories than physics, I take this to mean any difficult discourse. By which, are we further to assume, fiction should be "easy"?

Poetic: Given the influences of theory and the institutions that support us, how might we define and express our own poetics? That is, writing. What is it? Where does it come from? How would we have our own be?

So yes, this is a writing course, but it is as well a course on how writing moves through the world, especially our own. It is not a course that knows itself beforehand, but one that unfolds according to the questions you bring to it yourselves.

My own goal in the course is to reveal a world that when I was a student was received as simply natural, and hence invisible. The things you weren't supposed to talk about, or ask. What the good writers all figured out in good time.

Writing is an art, yes. Yes, it's highly personal. But it's not something we can ever own, and if we are not to be owned by it, instead, we must learn to see in certain ways what we too often assume, forgetting to name.

Books:
The Diblos Notebook, by James Merrill
Falling Into Theory, edited by David H. Richter
Colors of a Different Horse, edited by Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom
AWP Chronicle and *Poets and Writers Magazine* (recent issues)
Accident: A Day's News, by Christa Wolf

Requirements:
seminar presentation
mid-term exam
final project

Seminar Presentation: In which you organize, present, and "teach" the evening's material for the class, translating as necessary to render it pertinent to writers. This is not to be conceived of as a lecture, but rather as an opportunity for you to share your understanding of certain writing issues in some meaningful and lasting way. I encourage you to invent strategies to engage the rest of the class in your own learning processes. You may use in-class writing, small group projects, or other forms of collaborative learning to elucidate the reading material. The focus of whatever you do should always be to direct our attention to writerly ways of understanding and making use of what we are learning.

Mid-term Exam: Something you will write in class to help me assess the extent to which you have been engaged in our material.

Final Project: This project is a working process manuscript that is a piece of writing looking at itself in the context of writing and this class. You will determine what it looks like and is, but it will include, at the very least:

1. The *writing itself,* a story, or poems, or autobiographical writings, or mixed-genre writings. Whatever you want to be writing this term.

   Drafts, if you will. The final text, finally.
2. *Process writing.* This writing is about the writing of the writing, as it is personally experienced. Its origins, or where it comes from. Why you are writing it. What interests you about it. How it is getting written. Your whole writing life in general, and your questions and concerns, which of course is also writing, and all around is writing too.

   This writing you may keep as a journal, or write it as an essay, formal or informal. In it, you will locate the exact relation between the writing (as in #1 above) and your own motivations for writing it, the complex interstices between fiction and, let's say, fact, and how it intersects with your life and desire of writing. What it is to you. Why. The process, and impulse, and whole motivation and being.
3. *Poetics writing.* This writing looks at more formal and theoretical concerns (as opposed to personal), but may also be formal or informal, ongoing or concretized in a single statement. It will address specifically how you would have your writing (as in #1 above) move through the world. What would you have it be in relation to what other bodies of writing? How might this be expressed in formal terms? How does the writing know itself (fiction, literary fiction, poetry, what)? What does this mean in terms of the overall organizing structures of the writing?
4. *Bibliography,* to include at least ten annotated selections. By "annotation" here, I mean not only (briefly) what the citation is about, but also why you have included it in your writer's project. This should include both literary and theoretical texts, the "writing" that you love, and the "writing about writing" that helps you further understand yourself as a writer.
5. *Writer's notebook.* This is a place for writing, for notes and ideas and fragments of whatever strikes your fancy. A wild zone of writing, where you experiment and play and explore unfettered the possibilities of language.

   Particulars: In addition, this notebook will not be an ordinary notebook, which inspires ordinariness of purpose. Rather, it will have at least two organizing principles: (1) it will be bound in some nontraditional manner (you may sew it, you may keep it in a box, you may use the binding of an old and gutted book, you may superimpose it on another text, etc.); and (2) for every entry in your book you should include some nonverbal artifact (a rock, an image, a mathematics equation, a geological diagram, an ultrasound, etc.). Write at least weekly. Use what you will of what you write in your notebook in your other writings for this project.

6. *Class presentation* of your project at the end.

Procedures:
Each night will include some combination of the following: seminar presentation(s), in-class writing or activities and discussions, and small group work.

By small group work, I mean a four-person writing group formed at the beginning of the term and devoted to the problem of helping its members through their final projects. That is, you should choose to be part of a group whose writing interests reflect and are complementary to your own. You should get to know each other early. You should have ways of communicating (preferably e-mail) outside of class. You should expect to meet outside of class. You may begin by defining your writing goals for the class, and be prepared to redefine them as the class goes on. You should be privy to all aspects of your group members' final projects. And so on.

English 408: Advanced Narrative Writing

English 408 is an advanced writing-intensive course, focused on narrative writing. My goal for it, as your teacher, is that you, as a group, will form a strong and cohesive writing community that will challenge and support each of you, as a writer. I also hope this class will help you frame some guiding questions for your writing that will help sustain it for you in the future. For either one of these things to happen, you must be willing to write a great deal and to think critically about both your writing and your writing process. You will also be expected to treat the work of others with as much care and consideration as you give your own. Finally, I hope (and I mean this) you'll have fun. You may, of course, have other goals for this class, and I encourage you to share them with the rest of us.

Texts: Class books, available as they are constructed, and available at Quick Copy.

Requirements:

1. Writing portfolio: forty-plus pages of "original" narratives—two submissions and one radical revision
2. Response portfolio
    a. Class contract and writing autobiography
    b. Process analysis/cover sheet for each text—one page maximum
    c. Self-evaluation/end sheet for each text—one page maximum
    d. Peer responses—those you write and those you receive
    e. Executive summaries of peer responses
    f. Final self-evaluation
3. Participation in small and whole groups
4. Final reading/performance

Explanation of Assignments:

1. Contract: Your class contract will serve a threefold function. First, it will provide you with the opportunity to examine who and where you are as a writer by asking you to consider your writing autobiography. In plain terms, how have you ended up here, in this class? Where did you begin? What have your writing experiences been like along the way? What has been good? What would you change? Where do you want to end up with your writing? What, exactly, do you really want from it? Please don't assume, either, that what I really want is for you to be literal or linear about this. What I want is that you should contemplate your own private writing experience in some meaningful way so that you can project what you would like to accomplish this term, on your own terms, whatever you like. That is Part 1, 2–3 pages of narrative.

Part 2 will describe your projects themselves, what you want to be writing this term. Please don't tell me what your work will be "about," (at least not as far as plot or theme goes), but rather what interests you about it—a story you've always wanted to tell, a particular narrative problem, something technical or structural, a collage, a braid, a memoir. You might want to write something that disrupts linear narrative in a new way for you, or attempt long sentences, or write in a disjunctive or conjunctive mode. Or the problem you set for yourself may be one more of substance. Maybe there's a family story you want to find some way of telling; maybe you want to try nonfiction narrative, intermingle fact and fiction, tell it straight or crooked. Here what I want is for you not only to talk about some projects you want to attempt, but also why. What intrigues you about them? What do you hope to learn and/or achieve? Why this project, and not some other you might choose. What, too, does it mean for you that you choose this, now?

In Part 3, you will set three goals for yourself as a writer on which you want to be evaluated for "improvement." If you think you can't write plot, or your language is weak, or you don't know how to structure a story, say why and what you hope to do about it. We'll be working on this together throughout the term.

2. The texts themselves: forty-plus new pages of narrative, including your radical revision.

3. Radical revision: Your final submission this term will be a "radical revision" of one of your first two. Wendy Bishop defines "radical revision" as a "reworking, rethinking . . . that is so experimental *for the writer*, it just may fail" (229–230). (That is, for some highly innovative writers, a radical revision might just be to write a traditional story.) In the past, I have helped to define the parameters of such experimentation, and some of you have done these with me—collaborative autobiographies, multidimensional narrative collages, and so on. The point is not to turn you into experimental writers, but to provide you with an opportunity to do writing you might not readily discover by writing the way you think you are supposed to write to please me and get a good grade. What you learn through these experiences will guide you to and through your next writing challenges, and this is how professional writers also work and grow. For the purposes of this class, your radical revision need not be limited to the page, but may include other dimensions or media. We will talk more about this as the term goes on.

4. Process analysis/cover sheet: For each of your submissions, you will write a discussion of how and why you came to write it the way you came to write it—what went into it, what stayed, what didn't, what it *is*. This is not so much an evaluation (what you like and don't about it), as it is a "thinking about" the problems you encountered writing it, what interested you about them, the solutions you discovered, etc. Describe what you have done as specifically as you can. At the end of the page, list three questions you still want answered about your own text. These will be included in class books, as well as in your final response portfolios.

5. Self-evaluation/end sheet: This is your opportunity to second-guess me as your teacher. For each submission, write a self-evaluation in which you critique the work as you expect I might. What do you think are its strengths? Its weaknesses? What would you change if you could?

6. Executive summaries: Throughout the term, your peers will be responding to your work, and you will be learning to hear and respond to their responses. Each time your work is responded to you will write an executive summary of the responses. Such a summary tabulates and summarizes the comments your peers have made about your writing. You should identify points of agreement—what observations appear most often? Is there any consensus, and if so, what is that? Or if your readers are split on something crucial, where does that split occur and what can you make of it? You should also identify the comment(s)—either singular or plural—that seem most useful or astute to you. Finally, you should identify what it is you yourself have learned—both as a writer in general, and about this text in particular—from reading your peer responses. Where do they agree with your own self-evaluation? Where don't they? What do you plan to do with what you have learned?

Also, for written responses, please remark on the relation between what your peers said about your work and what you wrote in your self-evaluation.

Each executive summary should be clearly labeled with your name, the title of the text, and the kind of summary it is: small group, rough draft discussion, whole group discussion, or whole group written response. When you bring your work before the whole class for discussion, it should be the very best you can do with it at this point. Peer response should be descriptive, not evaluative, as it should aim to help us understand and move our own writing forward.

7. Final self-evaluation: This is your opportunity to analyze and evaluate what you have done throughout the term and bring some completion to the terms and the goals you set for yourself. In it, you should decide, at some point, what grade you think you deserve for the class, and why. If I agree, that's the grade you will get. If I don't, I will let you know why.

Note: Of the above, your narrative writing submissions and radical revision should be bound in a final writer's book. The rest of the assignments should be kept in a three-ring response portfolio.

Response portfolio: This should contain, in separate, clearly labeled sections: (1) your course contract, (2) your process analyses, (3) your self-evaluations, (4) the peer responses you have received, (5) your executive summaries, and (6) the peer responses you have written. I will spot-check these portfolios periodically throughout the term, and review them as well at the end.

Participation: Required. To participate, you have to be here and you have to do your work when it is assigned. Because of the way this course is designed, I cannot accept late work.

Final reading/performance: This will be yet another way of disseminating the work we have done in the class—a presentation/performance/reading of your radical revisions.

Class structure—how it will work: Throughout the term, we will be writing, compiling, publishing, and responding to class books of our own work. On the date a story is due, come to class with a clearly reproduced copy of your finished story, prefaced by your process narrative and followed by your self-evaluation. I will compile the book and deliver it to the print shop, where you will pick it up within a day or two. Class will alternate between small and whole group workshops, for the most part.

Small group workshops: Most of you have done these before, working with rough drafts of stories. In this class, whenever you have a small group discussion, the writer will listen to the comments of the readers, take careful notes, and write an executive summary of what got said. Both notes and summaries should be collected in the small group section of your response portfolio. After such small group workshops, you'll have additional time to rework your stories for whole group workshops.

Whole group workshops: For whole group workshops, all students will write thoughtful and well-considered one-page responses to each submission that is discussed. Make one copy of these responses for each writer, and keep one in your own response portfolio. What this means is that you, as a writer, will receive written responses from your peers to your work, as well as workshop discussion. As in small groups, take careful notes during discussion so that your executive summary can address both what your peers write and what they say about your work. Also, please comment on the relation between the two modes of response—did the class discussion reinforce or transform what students had already written?

In yet another class twist, the writer will begin discussion by summarizing his or her process narrative and framing the questions she or he articulated there.

English 408: Advanced Narrative Writing: Faction

> We have, as usual, no word for a work of prose fiction, so the word "novel" does duty for everything, and thereby loses its only real meaning as the name of a genre. The . . . distinction between fiction and non-fiction, between books which are about things admitted not to be true and books which are about everything else, is apparently exhaustive enough for critics.
>
> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

> I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance.
>
> Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language"

> In writing, brother—since you ask—we are more and more obliged to act the part of the writer and, by falling out of character, to pull off our masks, to let our authentic self shimmer through, between the lines which follow the social code, whether we want to or not. We are mostly blind to this process. A day like this, paradoxical in its repercussions, forces us, forces me to make the personal public, to overcome reluctance.
>
> Christa Wolf, *Accident: A Day's News*

Course Description:

This is an advanced course in narrative writing in which we will focus on questions raised by the hypothetical genre, "faction." Not fiction, not nonfiction, faction is a genre that, like language itself, "bears within itself the necessity for its own critique" (Derrida 113–14). Proceeding from the old creative writing cliché to "write what you know," in this class we will ask ourselves what it is we know, how it is we know it, and what it means to write it, whatever it is. In so doing, we will attempt to explore everything that comes together in the writing moment to make writing happen as it happens. We will look explicitly at problems of material, as well as authorship and authoring, and writing. We will consider questions about who we are in the act of writing, what it means to "write the self," and what happens to our texts as they circulate in the world. We may explore new writing practices, including (but not limited to) various types of co-authoring, autobiography as an invention strategy, and multigenre forms. As a working community of writers, we will try not to ask any questions that we already know the answers to. We will work in large and small groups. Fifty pages minimum new work, to include some writing about writing and each other's writing as well as our own writing, about what we know to be "true" and what we believe we "make up."

Rationale:

That, at any rate, was how I described this class last fall. I was, and remain, motivated in designing this course by two basic areas of interest. The first derives from my long-standing curiosity about the unstable boundaries between fiction and fact, and by the questions this instability raises about the ontological status of each creative writing text. Increasingly, these questions drive and inform my own writing in ways that I believe may be of interest to this class.

The second area of interest has to do more specifically with the "problem of material," and derives from a curious observation I have made over the past decade of teaching, what might be called the paradox of family—its prohibitions and imperatives—as a source for writing, both in general and in particular. What I mean is that, like myself at an earlier point in my writing development, student writers often privilege the concept of "invention" over the concept of "inscription," believing that what is "made up" is somehow more "creative" than what might have "really happened." Somewhat paradoxically, the most compelling material often carries with it the most inhibiting proscriptions—how can you write what you really know, what you really want to write, when what you really want to write, what you really know, is, inevitably, your family. Read "family" here as a metaphor for whatever is forbidden.

This class is designed to provide a context where we can safely write what we really want to write. And it is designed to make explicit all of the difficulties, problems, and benefits that inhere in this writing.

The Palimpsest:

This four-part assignment, may be supplemented by in-class writings and other directed writing.

Identify a story you have always wanted to write, something that really happened and about which you feel strongly, but which, for some reason, has always felt "forbidden." This need not be a secret, or anything traumatic or even dramatic, but it does have to be something about which you care deeply and which you have never yet been able to write. Your assignment, this term, is to find a way to write it by writing over it multiple times.

Part I. Choose your story. Think about your story. Write the story of why you want to write the story, which should include the story, what really happened as well as why you find the story compelling and why, in addition, you find the story impossible to write.

Part II. Write the story as fiction.

Part III. Write the story of how you wrote the story, each step, as you go along, your feelings, your discoveries, your fears, your archaeological dig, as it were, into this story you are writing.

Part IV. Make a text that somehow combines at least parts of all three of the texts you have written this term.

That is it, and it is as straightforward and simple as it will be, in its own way, complex and difficult. I will write this assignment along with you.

III Legends

13 Critical Terms for Creative Writers: An Easy Reference Guide

Elsewhere I've confessed to having gotten into my own brand of trouble for my tendency toward irony (see the *Irony* entry below) and deflection. I understand through the grapevine that the first time I ever published anything on writing ("Teaching Creative Writing: A Feminist Critique," in the *AWP Chronicle*), graduate students at UC Irvine where aghast at my "misreading" of Foucault, when I was just playing around. François and I used to argue over whether I was the most "disingenuous" (his position), or the most "ingenuous" (my position) person he knew. And I had a therapist once who explained to me very patiently, as if she were speaking to a somewhat slow child, that she could not know what I was thinking if I did not tell her, or if I told her something altogether different.

There are plenty of feminist theorists who will argue that irony itself is a particular kind of female discourse, since it enables women to embed other meanings in what they feel safe to say. There are plenty of feminist theorists who will argue that a female discourse is at least double-voiced.

So it occurs to me that some disclaimer to this reference guide might be in order. I wrote it for my students, to help them out with the way I talk and the terms I use, as they are important to me. It is not intended as definitive, and I indulge throughout in both stylistic and intellectual eccentricities. (And I could be wrong, so be careful if you quote me.) I suppose if I were asked to say what, precisely, my intent is here, beyond some broad and useful definitions, it would be, once again, to provide a model of one way we can play in the fields (you see, I am joking) of critical theory without succumbing, like Dorothy approaching Oz, to the ether. Use it as you will. Look for spaces in it that open up new spaces for writing.

1. Preliminary Terms

Theory

In some creative writing circles, theory is a bad word: theory gives creative writers hives. That's their theory: *Don't get near me, I'm creative.* Of course they can't say exactly how they do what they do (their writing), which just comes out the way it does. *Isn't that amazing?*

Amazing is as amazing does.

Whenever I ban the word "creative" in my classes, students are discomfited. Creativity, after all, has been their mark of distinction for years. Maybe they couldn't play baseball, maybe their outfits were never way-cool, but at least they were "creative" (at least according to their mothers), and this turned out to be by far a better thing than what kind of athlete or how attractive they were.

Creativity is a dangerous theory.

Creativity is a dangerous theory because it is exclusive, because it sets the value we place on who is speaking, because it masks itself as natural, without a theory, and because it marks the manner by which texts move through the world.

Having no theory is a dangerous theory because it reinscribes the structures we can't see that nonetheless contain us.

And as always, much of the power of ideology is that it is invisible.

Theory helps make the invisible visible. Creative writers need it, even if it gives them hives.

Author

In his elegant analysis, "What Is an Author?" Michel Foucault develops a complex argument that transforms the author from a creative genius to a function of literary institutions and their guiding principles of homogeneity, filiation, and authentication. By such logic, the author no longer precedes the work as the actual person who wrote it, but rather is subsequent to it as an institutional construct we produce by reading strategies that enable us to make the work fit both what we know about the "writer" (biographical information) and what we value in such writing. Even now, with modern literary criticism, the principles that govern these strategies are similar to those once used to determine Biblical authenticity. We use what we know about the writer and his or her life to explain the presence of certain events in a work, and their transformations and disruptions, to impose a certain unity of writing, to neutralize contradictions, and to describe a particular source of expression that can account for all writing gathered under that writer's name.

For Foucault, this analysis is important not only because it provides the basis for developing an historical analysis of discourse, but also because it helps us reconceptualize the ideological status of the author. As he writes:

> The author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. . . . (When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inverts it, one has an ideological production.) The author is therefore the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning. (159)

Thus, Foucault concludes, we should stop asking the old questions: "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express?" (160).

And ask instead: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions?" (160).

In other words: *Who gets to speak? Where, when, how, and why?*

And these are questions writers need to ask because of the perspective they can give us on our work, as well as how they can inform the important choices we make about where and how we would have it circulate in the world. Also, they remind us that writing is not natural, but highly conventional and strictly regulated.

You have to learn the system you are in, or you're not really in it, and because the death of the author feels like annihilation, it is a hard thing to accept. But Foucault's questions also enable us to choose our own systems. If we are bound and determined to write for Hollywood or New York, that is one thing and it will determine how we must proceed, but we can choose as well to write for literary presses, local magazines, performance studios, an e-mail circle or small group of friends, our families, our children, ourselves. Whatever we choose will mark out a space in which writing can happen and thrive, and to the extent that Foucault's questions can help us find and then locate ourselves in that space, they are enough, in many cases, to make writing prevail over silence.

I myself went all the way through college never saying anything in class, but, during a recent student project presentation, one whole class, all thirty-six of them, stood up chanting, "NO MORE SILENCE!" Some students were clapping or stamping their feet; many were hollering and hooting. They were making a good deal of noise. One girl was wearing a large black t-shirt, on the back of which she'd written, in white puff fabric paint:

> Silenced.
> I have been silenced and for the first time in my life it scares me to death. For the first time in my life I understand you, I am you, it is you it is me and we cannot speak. And have you noticed I don't speak with you? I sit here, silent, I take everything in, I quote you to the others, gospel, but I sit here, silent, when you speak. A person does not simply speak. I do not simply speak. I simply do not speak. I simply do not.
> WHEN WILL I SIMPLY SPEAK?
> —Beth, Beth, Beth, Beth
>
> —Beth Wiggins

Writer

S/he who writes.

Text

What s/he writes.

Irony

A stance toward the world in language in which what we mean is always something else. Often charged with wit, complexity, and distance, just as often (be careful) misunderstood.

Or: "The difference between what we mean and what we say may constitute the only depth in us."—probably Geoffrey Hartman

Projection, Commentary, Poetics

From Tzvetan Todorov, in "How to Read," where he draws some critical distinctions between activities performed upon the text in reading. The first he calls *projection*, and it is how we learn to read in school, to look beyond the transparent window of the work to its communicative or referential function. Projection neutralizes and reduces textuality by focusing exclusively on what the text is *about*. So we ask, not what is it, but what does it *mean*? The text becomes an equal sign, on the other side of which the true intention of the author is fully revealed. Reading is, in this sense, a form of archaeology. Hence, the whole extended enterprise of interpretation, our preoccupation with meaning and theme. Projection in reverse turns into backwards writing, the arduous practice we learn in school of "translating" ideas we have in our heads into the clearly equal signs of words. (This is bad, in general, for writing.)

In the second activity, *commentary*, the goal is close reading, or what we learn to do in our more advanced literary studies, a scrutinizing of the text-as-object in an attempt to illuminate meaning, not transcribe it. This, too, has a corollary writing act, in which the writer seeks deliberately to lace deep meaning in her or his texts, making frequent use of such reference texts as thesauruses and dictionaries of literary symbols. (This is also bad, in general, for writing.)

A third approach to the text is *poetics*, which sees the text as a "product of a fictive and yet existing mechanism, literature" (235), and seeks to develop a general science of that mechanism by defining its general principles and constitutive elements. For Todorov, while poetics is always general, *reading* takes as its object the "singular text," with the goal of dismantling the "system of that text" (237).

These distinctions are as useful for writing as they are for reading; after all, isn't the first goal of learning writing that of denaturalizing projection, and the final goal that of articulating a poetics of writing that can help the writer understand the system of each text as it unfolds. As I tell my students, every text has to teach the reader how to read it. As my students soon find out, the text must come to know itself as a system of its own, revealed, in turn, by other systems.

2. Language Terms

Language

From Ferdinand de Saussure, we understand language as a system of signs, not, as we may have imagined it, as a transparent nomenclature. Though at first it may be difficult to accept, words do not reflect a fixed one-to-one correspondence between the things they refer to and themselves. Think about it. In such a language system, we'd need a different word, just as we each have names, for every tree in the forest, every car in the parking lot, every chair in the classroom. It would get unwieldy.

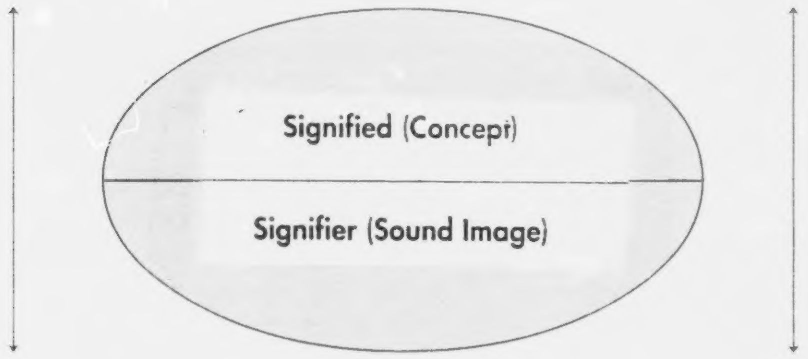
The arbitrary nature of language is, at least in part, important to writers because it reminds us not only that words mean only in relation to other words, but also that meaning is inherently unstable: meaning is what it is because we agree that it should be so, but what happens if the agreements should change? We are reminded of the material aspects of language—sound, rhythm, visual form—which we must learn to work exactly as musicians work music, or painters paint. We don't ask painters anymore what their paintings are "of," but we still ask writers what their stories are "about," as if that should be our exclusive concern.

Of course, there *is* a difference between language and the materials other artists use. Words *do* mean, and what they mean will go about the world, somehow attached to the writer. What and how they mean, however, (since meaning gets made by the reader) are to a large extent beyond our own control. This doesn't stop writers from trying to push words around to get them, the words, to say what they, the writers, mean, but, as I've discussed elsewhere, forcing intentions like this can be bad for writing.

Sign

There are many kinds of semiotic systems, where meaning proceeds from the organization of meaning-making signs (sports, fashion, traffic, report cards—you name it), but here we are concerned with the linguistic sign, which consists of an arbitrary relation between a sound image, or signifier—like the saying of the word *tree*—and a concept, or signified—like the idea of *treeness.*

Like this:



Together, these two elements create a linguistic sign. Think, for instance, of two sides of a piece of paper; you can't have one without the other, but you can cut it up and still have the paper. So the sign does not name, or articulate, a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified, but is instead: (1) arbitrary—not dependent on any prior logic; (2) relational—constructing meaning through the play of similarity, placement, and difference between its signifier and signified;

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and (3) conventional—governed by a series of agreements among a given community of speakers.

In language, for example, we can make words mean because of what they share in common with like words, defining a *paradigmatic* relation. Grammar, phonetics, syntax, and semantics are largely classifications of paradigmatic relations in language. Nouns, for example, all function at some level in the same way, are recognizable as nouns, and can be differentiated from verbs. This helps us to organize our speaking and to make sense. Some other paradigmatic relations in language include rhymes, homonyms, synonyms, and antonyms, each of which structures a vertical relation of similarity to like signs in the system and distinguishes them from unlike signs.

But words also depend for their meaning on *syntagmatic* relations, or relations of placement, by which, according to Saussure, they are defined in relation to all the words surrounding them. The word "bat," for example, means something different when you say, "Bat the ball all the way over the outfield," than when you say, "The bat flew into my hair." Syntagmatic relations are organized horizontally according to a logic of placement.

But for Saussure, the critical relation of language use is one of binary opposition, which enables us to say that we know what things are by virtue of what they are not. Opposition depends on principles of exchange, one thing for another—money for bread, *p* for *b*. This is not to be confused with the concept of difference, which, on the other hand, exists among synonyms. *Fear, dread,* and *anxiety,* for example, are different but fungible. Any one of these words could disappear from the language and we would not notice, but, if the concept of fear itself disappeared, what would happen to the concept of bravery? Even a concept like *blue* depends on the point along the continuum of color where we will agree that it becomes *not-blue.* For Saussure, that point of binary opposition is the critical point, for it is where meaning is made possible.

For writers, especially women, the principle of opposition can be problematic, for, just as it has functioned at linguistic levels to enable meaning to take place, it has functioned at metaphysical levels to organize systems of Western thought:

God/man
heaven/earth
self/other
subject/object
presence/absence

law/chaos
sun/moon
light/dark
culture/nature
good/evil
man/woman

And so on.

These pairs are easily apprehended as loaded oppositions, in which the male pole is privileged over the female, and, for this reason, binarism—as elegant a structure as it might be, as efficient an organization—is suspect in the eyes of some feminist thinkers, who envision a more fluid both/and vision as preferable to the hierarchical constraints of such either/or logic.

As for why we should think about language in these terms at all—shouldn't writers leave this to the linguists, and ply instead their unfettered imaginations?—I usually say two things: (1) this kind of thinking is a critical first step toward denaturalizing language and helping us begin to understand its shifting fault lines, after which it will become much easier to explore those material aspects I described above, and (2) structural linguistics provides an extremely valuable model for structural narratology, which is as useful a system for thinking about narrative as I know of.

Différance

This is a Derridean term that refers to the deconstruction of a binary opposition by positing a third relation—a *différance*—that essentially splits the prior two terms. For Derrida, meaning is constituted not by a final signification, or final relation between the signified and signifier, but instead by the struggle, the play of differences, among them. You can't ever get to meaning but can only engage in the process by which meaning, in the struggle to achieve it, is endlessly deferred. Hence, the famous pun in Derrida's coined spelling of *différance* with an *a*, to suggest two senses of the French verb *différer:* to defer, as well as to differ.

The Center

What Derrida fundamentally deconstructs in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Here, he argues that we have reached the point in history where we must begin to think about the play of structure, and how it governs itself by a logic that takes itself apart. For, as Derrida describes it, the center has always been, by definition, that very thing within the structure which, "while governing the structure, escapes structurality" (109). Imagine a linguistic sign. The center of the sign would have to be the very point at which the play of substitution and replacement, by which the sign makes meaning, would cease. But as soon as it stops, the sign itself, which is, by definition, a relation, can no longer exist. The center, which is the very thing that allows the structure to become a structure in the first place, cannot participate in the operation of the structure, and so lies elsewhere, outside the structure.

And that is how Derrida can say, "The center is not the center" (109), although, as he later explained, he never said the center did not exist—he said the center was a function, which is true. And that is how it is also possible that Derrida can describe the sign as "contradictorily coherent," and how he can conclude that "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire" (109).

Is it useful for writers to know this? It is useful for writers to contemplate the essential instability of their material so that they may focus instead on what holds it together. If desire holds not only language, but also narrative, identity, and culture, together, think of things flying completely apart. One fundamental desire is that that should never happen, that armies should never face off across the desert, that our children will always nestle sweetly in their sleep.

Supplementarity

Another important term from Derrida, which suggests that in the play of substitution and replacement—one term, or concept, for another—that enables language to mean, something—a supplement—always gets added. In other words, in the process of making meaning, we take a linguistic sign and replace it with another, but then the original sign that we started with is slightly different—supplemented—and so we must begin the process of replacement again, with the same result. In this way, meaning is endlessly deferred and becomes something like pure play, the thing that gives us both a kind of pleasure and an organizational structure, rather than where it was headed in the first place—a final signified—where it might, theoretically, have stopped, except that the very thing that allows it to exist in the first place—its play—is what prevents it from ever stopping.

(Take, for example, your son or daughter's Little League scorebook. [I realize that this assumes you have a child who plays ball, but if you don't, please use your imagination.] Each week, the team plays two games, and the official scorekeeper, who may or may not be you, will record them carefully in the book, all the balls and strikes, the hits, the runs, the RBIs and errors. Each game will supplement the team's official record, and the players' statistics will shift and grow. But the scorebook and the record, though added to each week, remain the scorebook and the record, as both, supplemented, shift and grow.)

In addition, it is paradoxical that the very thing that enables this play of substitution and replacement to begin—the imaginary center—never existed in the first place. Thus, we replenish not a *presence* but an *absence*, which is how Derrida can say, "Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around" (121). We can mourn this absence as a loss, Derrida goes on to argue, or, more sensibly, celebrate it as an affirmation.

When I recognized supplementarity as the very same logic that enabled me to develop a writing process that proceeds more from language than from image, I was thrilled to have a way of understanding how I wrote. Later, I learned that Derrida himself calls supplementarity a logic of writing. In class, I call it *burrowing*, a particular way of working the language, play.

Burrowing

A term I use for something like *supplementarity* (see above).

Many writers report that their stories begin with a first sentence—that's all, just a sound of words in their head, in a particular order. Imagine such a sentence. Listen to it closely. Now imagine that sentence as the first sign of a story, and add—*supplement*—another sign, a second sentence. The story has just become two sentences, the second of which has transformed the first, but the two form a unit nonetheless, to which another sentence will be added, and so on. One becomes two, two becomes three, three becomes four, and, with each addition, the entire story shifts and grows.

I don't remember how the term *burrowing* occurred to me. It just feels like that, burrowing into language, working your way into words, like an animal or archaeologist, with dirt under your fingers and a sense of perpetual discovery and, yes, accomplishment.

And if any of this feels right to you, even metaphorically, then you can't behave as if meaning existed in a way that can be fixed in language anymore, and you can't write that way either.

In burrowing, it is critical to listen to the sentence embedded in the prior sentence, the just-written sentence, to hear, as well, the sentence-to-be-written. This is as much a function of sound and rhythm as it is of meaning. That is, if you listen closely to what you have just written, you can hear the trace of the sentence to be written, what must surely follow, just as you must stop yourself from pushing meaning forward by leaps. In the first strategy, the listening, the burrowing mode, writing is always proceeding with an ear toward where you have just been instead of with an eye toward where you think you may be going. In the second, you experience yourself not as a writer writing but instead as a measure of control, and the writing is constantly starting and stopping. It is the stopping that is bad for writing. Stopping, and stopping, and stopping.

It is also critical to train ourselves to become alert to the structure that comes into being in the moment of the writing, where writing takes place.

Triggering Subject

Borrowed from Richard Hugo's book, *The Triggering Town*, the term "triggering subject" refers to that source within the writer that makes the writer want to write. All writers have one, Hugo says, and for him it was a small town in the American West that has seen better days and is in decline. This is a useful metaphor because it works to demystify classic theories of the *muse*, however much it still defers to certain received ideas of *inspiration*. But Hugo further maintains that every writer has as well an idiosyncratic, highly personal sense of language, and that learning how to write is a process of transferring allegiance from triggering subject to personal language, what marks each writer's writing as his or her own. In addition, if writing is an act of faith, and if we truly care about our subjects, if they mean more to us than anything and clearly drive us to our writing, then we must set them aside to explore our private languages, which, if we are honest, will lead us back, and more profoundly, to our subjects. In this way, what we really meant to say all along will be spared the tremendous assault of our own most earnest intentions, and hence emerge on the other side of writing, unscathed.

Combinatorial Play

From Italo Calvino, who says that writing is a process in which we toss words together until they make a spark that leads us down into that place inside us where writing takes place, maybe the sub- or unconscious, or some other place where we have unfettered access to language.

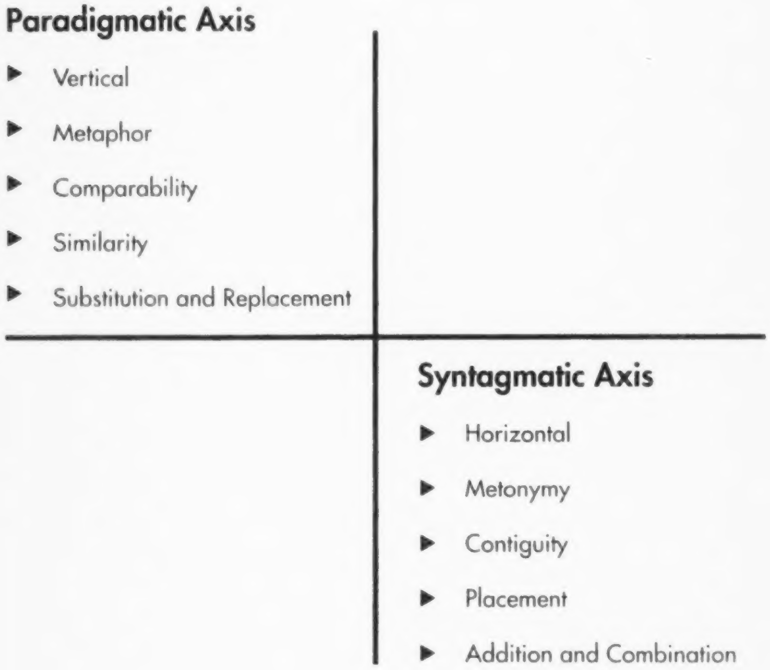
Metaphor and Metonymy

These are literary tropes, or highly specialized conventions of literary language. *Metaphor* is based on a logic of substitution and replacement, is paradigmatic, and depends on comparisons between like things.

Metonymy (which you learn in school to define on tests as part-for-the-whole, and then, for the rest of your life, confuse with *synecdoche*, or whole-for-the-part) is a highly useful trope of contiguity, which depends, for its meaning, on its placement in the syntagm, how the terms are related, one to another, their interconnectivities and convergences. Think of a dinner setting, and the various relations of the parts, moving out from the plate, at the center, to the spoon, the round crystal base of the wine glass, the hand on the stem, the stunning claret color of the wine as it touches the lips of the guest, the other guest, seated to the side just in front of the frosted, paned windows, and outside, the unforgiving winter moon.

Or, think of a row of students, sitting at their desks. Each student—Rod, then Linda, then Xaviere, then Michael, then Hope—is related metonymically to each other and metaphorically to the concept of student. Replace those students with five different students—Rachel, then Merry, then Evans, then Tom, then Arnie—and the metaphorical relationship remains unchanged, but the metonymical one is transformed.

Here's a useful diagram:


Paradigmatic Axis
▶ Vertical
▶ Metaphor
▶ Comparability
▶ Similarity
▶ Substitution and Replacement
Syntagmatic Axis
▶ Horizontal
▶ Metonymy
▶ Contiguity
▶ Placement
▶ Addition and Combination

Again, we might be tempted to dismiss such categories as having value primarily for readers. Why should creative writers even concern themselves with such complicated things as this?

Many years ago, as I was preparing to emerge from my self-imposed exile from writing, I met the man I later married, who told me that, as part of his own training to become a writer, he had spent his eighteenth year thinking up a metaphor for everything he saw. *By George,* I thought, *so that's how it's done.* And I went outside my dormitory room, right that very instant, and started staring at the branches of a tree, a mighty redwood (this was Santa Cruz). What I wanted to imagine was a metaphor for the mighty redwood. I tried and I tried, my whole brain straining for a long time, and then I started crying, as I had failed absolutely to think up a single metaphor for such a simple thing as a tree, its branches, the sky through them, and maybe some clouds. In this way, I proved once again to myself that I did not have what it took to be a writer.

Years later, I discovered that Roman Jakobson, another structuralist linguist, had done work among aphasics, in which he discovered that some suffered from the ability to think only metaphorically, and some, only metonymically. Their disorders rendered them incapable of making common sense, but from this sampling Jakobson hypothesized that we are, all of us, hard-wired to make certain kinds of associations in our thinking. He further went on to suggest that metaphor is the favored trope of poets, and metonymy the inclination of narrative writers.

Discovering this, discovering that perhaps my failure to make metaphors might not, after all, have been a fatal writing flaw, helped, but by the time I learned this it was just dumb luck that I'd managed, after all, to persevere. It also helped me to understand how, at least when I was growing up, metaphor had become the privileged trope in our academic institutions, largely as a result of the still-dominant influence of New Criticism. For me, it meant a lot just to know that metaphor was not the only figurative use of language. And then, of course, metonymy works beautifully in burrowing to make stories that borrow energy and form from the sheer force of their metonymical accumulation, a narrative logic of considerable import.

Langue and *Parole*

Two important Saussurean terms, which differentiate language as system from language in actual use. Saussure believed that the system itself (*langue*) could be mapped and comprehensively described at any given moment in history (its synchronic dimension), but that in actual use (*parole*) it is unstable and can change through time (its diachronic dimension). Though Saussure was more interested in langue, there is no inherent reason the relation is hierarchical.

Other comparable terms are *system* and *discourse,* with the latter—a language system in use—being clearly significant for writers. Think of how the legal system regulates itself through its discursive practices: lawyers get to be lawyers by virtue of mastering highly specialized uses of language. And while this, too, may seem beyond the scope of our more *creative* concerns, it is useful to note the ways in which literary discourse is similarly governed, despite the apparently looser structurations of its institutions—small press and mainstream publishing, creative writing programs, arts organizations.

Discourse

See above, under "*Langue* and *Parole.*"

Dominant Discourse

Any discourse that moves with certain privilege through the world, the swirl of language all around us, what others herd around, all that herding. Maybe it will sound like the way professors talk in a lecture, or a newscaster making an important announcement. Maybe it just sounds like your father when he is holding forth on some opinion he expects you to share. The concept is related but not identical to the variety of specialized discourses that wield power in this culture—legal, medical, political, academic, and so on. But even in your family there's a certain kind of discourse that will dominate and govern familial interactions, or, because a workplace is a little like a family, take, for example, my own English department.

Since the state of California has outlawed affirmative action, it is perhaps unfashionable to locate the problem of who speaks and who doesn't within the framework of gender or other characteristics used to delineate muted groups. My own department, after all, strong-armed for many years by an inflexible affirmative action policy, is nearly fifty-fifty now, and the men don't understand why the women still "complain." Haven't they got what they want, already? Enough is enough—is plenty.

Yet even now, in department meetings, men continue to dominate discussion, offering little essay arguments with anecdotal evidence and full-scale reminders of how things have always been, according to our history and *Robert's Rules of Order.* Of course women talk, but the talk of women often seems parenthetical, compressed between the longer disquisitions of the men.

I wrote that, and certainly once it was true. Once, the women sat and listened to the men. These days it is less that way, but still there is a difference between the way the men and the way the women of this particular department fill up the space there is for talking in our meetings. A certain formal syntax takes over, and some of us are more or less at ease with it. Some of us can speak more in it, and some of us cannot, but it is the discourse—as influenced by Robert and that certain formal syntax—that governs who speaks, and who doesn't.

All discourse is similarly governed by what Foucault calls principles of "limitation" and "exclusion," which are determined by the institutions in charge. It is useful for writers to consider questions of hierarchy and power when it comes to simple matters of language, so that we may remember always to ask, *Whose turn is it to speak here, and why?*

Some Additional Useful Language Terms from Mikhail Bakhtin

Dialogic: Language takes place in a context, a particular historical and cultural moment, between or among speakers, each of whom brings to bear her or his own personal history in the moment. All this, the total context, participates in making meaning *dialogic,* part of a particularized dialogue, brought into being in that exact exchange.

Heteroglossia: From the Greek, *hetero* ("other, different") plus *glossa* or *glotta* ("tongue"). Bakhtin used this term to describe the many-tongued quality of the novel, its multivocality and messy combinations of many different languages, from the common bray and cackle to the highly refined. Normally stratified in culture, the coming together of these disparate languages in the novel can serve to explode dominant modes of thought.

Novel: The only "developing genre" that takes place in a "zone of contact with the present in all its open-endedness" (53).

Zone of contact with an open-ended present: What it is . . . just imagine.

Centripetal and centrifugal: The official and unofficial forces that govern the cultural world, the former seeking to impose order on a messy and noisy world, and the latter perpetually disrupting it. (Think of Derrida, and the force of the desire that holds together the contradictorily coherent. Armies facing off against the night.)

3. Gender Terms

Gender (Male/Female/Straight/Bisexual/Gay/Lesbian/Transgendered)

A cultural construct having to do with sexuality and sexual orientations. Not so much a matter of biology as a position on a continuum along a code of social discourse, with "male" and "female" on either end and a range of variations in between. Gender, in this sense, becomes something you choose, by virtue of your actions and affiliations, where you place yourself in relation to others.

Also, a highly useful metaphor for muted groups in general.

Now, a word about difference.

Imagine a Venn diagram, two intersecting circles, which share between them a vast mutual zone. On either side of this shared territory, a small moon-crescent represents an area discrete to each circle. Imagine that these circles represent the experience of men and women in a culture, one circle to each gender. What is clear from this model is that, by far, the larger part of our experience is experience we share in common, the vast intersection of their two circles, where the culture holds both groups together. But the moon-crescent shapes on either side—those are figures of interest, enigma, and mystery.

I borrow this model from Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," where she describes the separate crescent that represents female experience not shared with any other as a *Wild Zone* which lies entirely outside the realm of male awareness and which is where women should direct a sustained investigation to discover crucial elements of identity and difference. For years, this model was extremely powerful among my students. We liked to imagine this as a separate space for women—what men, in general, would not have access to because, in general, they would not choose it. We liked to imagine this Wild Zone as a place where anything might happen, or be expressed, and often did, or was. (I remember, in particular, a student video in which girls hung upside down from the branches of a tree, hooting and hollering, while a young man pounded on a sign on the lawn that posted the tree as a Wild Zone.) We liked, too, to imagine that this sphere might represent, for women as they chose, what Claudine Hermann has called an "*empty* space," as opposed to the full and showy space of men. If woman, she argues, has learned to respect this separate space, this is so because

> she needs to maintain a protective distance between herself and the men she has not chosen. As for those she may have chosen, there too, in order to avoid total annihilation, to escape man's habitual urge to colonize, she must conserve some space for herself, a sort of *no man's land*, which constitutes precisely what men fail to understand of her and often attribute to stupidity because she cannot express its substances in her inevitably alienated language. (169)

Now, I do not know. This model as a metaphor is still quite powerful, but it no longer seems so simple to embrace. Showalter argued some twenty years ago that, while men as well had a separate, discrete sphere, it was more widely available to the culture at large in the myths and traditions of that culture. My ambivalence about the power of this model is not just, as I have argued elsewhere, that men as a category no longer seem to function as the uncontested center of this culture (though my perspective might be skewed here since it is also true that I live on the edge of this vast unstable continent, where things may be shifting more quickly or more radically than elsewhere). But my ambivalence about this model also comes from my own observations as I watch my sons move toward and through adolescence and become increasingly aware that certain aspects of their experience may never be accessible to me (as a woman, not a mom).

I used to think this model highly useful for imagining, as well, the experience of any muted group in relation to a dominant one, how one's experience within the culture is largely determined by one's position in it. And I still do. The model continues to be useful, especially as it can be modified with other intersecting circles to represent the experience of people who might be doubly, or multiply, muted—black women, for example, or gay Asian American men. What no longer seems so clear to me is the uncontestability of the dominant group, especially in regard to the transparency or complete availability of their experience.

Let's say, then, that we are who we are—men and women, straight and gay, transgendered, bisexual—sexual beings. Let's say, too, as I have argued throughout this book, that gender and sexuality can serve as useful metaphors for other forms of marginalization, and that, in general, these are categories of position and relation. What any model of intersecting circles can make clear is that there are territories that we share in common, and territories that are separate and apart. Sometimes, we will turn our gaze toward those aspects of experience that we share in common in our culture, and sometimes we will turn it toward our own. Talk about difference is not, de facto, critical of men, or whoever is determined to constitute the dominant group. It is just a different subject is all. Each group has its wild zone, and there is value, for each group, in a sustained investigation of that zone, just as there is value in our continued exploration of shared zones.

Phallocentrism and Patriarchal Discourse

Other, more specialized names for the dominant discourse, referring to more particular modes of domination. In my own mind, I make a distinction between them, with *phallocentrism* referring more to language, and *patriarchal discourse* referring more to culture.

For example: In a recent theory class, students produced a magazine they called *Paeredaim: Entertainment for English Majors* that came with its own mascot doll for cover art and centerfolds. The doll, named Para, was a life-sized, blow-up female, papier-mâchéd from the texts of the writing included in the magazine, and sometimes she was wrapped in lacy underthings and sometimes she was naked, but she always wore a giant, hot pink dildo strapped to her groin with a leopard-skin harness and sheathed in a broken condom. This is how my students conceived of "the female writer trapped in patriarchal discourse."

In the magazine, Para posed in photographs with the Associate Dean of the School of Humanities, as well as the Associate Chair and the Graduate Director of the Department of English. Nonetheless, when she appeared in our department mail room, a sexual harassment charge was brought by a male colleague, and Para was promptly removed. Confronted with an icon of a "female writer trapped in patriarchal discourse," my patriarchalist colleague was discomfited and so got rid of the icon. Sometimes it is that simple—if you have the power—just to get rid of the offending voice, to not listen, to erase it, to shut it off.

Contiguous Discourse

One possible alternative to patriarchal discourse that proceeds by rejecting the privilege of linear logic. Faulkner said a sentence should plow straight through to its end, strong, like a furrow. But Virginia Woolf said that, very often, when one is a woman, one experiences a "splitting off of consciousness" (101). A model of contiguous discourse might reflect what linguists call "bracketing," with multiple branches taking off from nodes in a primary sentence, infinitely flexible and responsive to the splittings off of consciousness that linear logic would have us suppress.

Not this:

Capital Letter——————————————————**Period**

But this:

Capital Letter

Jouissance

Pleasure, female sexuality, liberated language, the sparks, and so on. It's French.

Mastery

The opposite of all of that. What is patriarchal. Epitomized by such New Critical values as clarity and coherence. What shuts down the play of meaning. Control.

The Real, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and Some Other Important Terms from Jacques Lacan

One of the most influential theories for French feminism is the structuralist revision of Freud developed by Jacques Lacan, for whom the unified human subject is always a myth. For Lacan, who posits the operations of the unconscious in relation to language (thereby ascribing to social construction what Freud has ascribed to biology), there are three basic realms of experience: the *Real*, the *Symbolic*, and the *Imaginary*.

The *Real* is everything we cannot know, what exists but is not available to us because it cannot be contained by our knowledge systems. Birth, for example, death, the body, sexuality (especially female sexuality). We cannot control it and we cannot know or talk about it, really, because we can only experience it. We are subject to it, not the other way around.

The *Symbolic* is what we call reality, the semiotic systems by which we carve up the world and make it accessible to us. Language is one crucial aspect of the *Symbolic Order*, but any system used to organize experience is included. For French feminists, the Symbolic is heavily associated with the ordering principles of patriarchy, which is commonly referred to as the *nom* of the Father, a pun which homonymically associates "name" and "no" (as in, "Daddy says *no*").

The *Imaginary* precedes the child's entry into the Symbolic Order, and corresponds with the pre-Oedipal stage of Freudian psychology. Here, roughly, is what happens as the child develops:

When a baby is born, the baby has no real sense of self, but experiences *being* as a fragmented bundle of nerves, drives, and inborn reflexes. Whatever comes into the baby's field of vision–the baby's foot, the mother's arm, a breast or nipple–is seen as separate and apart, and might be confused, momentarily, with self, which will shift as perception shifts. Because there is no framework for unity, there is no experience of it. The baby is a fragmented being.

Then, between the ages of six and eight months, the baby enters what Lacan calls the *Mirror Stage*, during which the baby will look at him- or herself in the mirror and recognize a whole, a unified being. However, the baby is still confused because, recognizing wholeness, the baby tends to conflate her- or himself with everything—the mother's arm or breast, his or her own image in the mirror, another child. During this time the baby exists in a fused dyadic unity with the mother, lacking any sense of separation from her and, hence, from the world, and, as a result, existing without a discrete sense of self. As Toril Moi describes it, there is "no presence and no absence, only identity and presence" (99). But in fact, when the baby sees him- or herself in the mirror and recognizes the self as a whole one, the baby does not understand that it is a double, any more than he or she understands that the fusion with the mother is an illusion, or that the wholeness she or he experiences, too, is an illusion.

But in the Oedipal crisis, the father intervenes to break up that unity, and with the father the law of language. That law—of the father, of the phallus, of language itself—comes to signify separation and loss, for it intrudes between the mother and the child, causing the loss not only of the maternal body and the imaginary unity the baby experienced with it, but also of the more generalized sensation of wholeness the child experienced as coextensive with his or her own image in the mirror. Simultaneously with the intrusion of the father, the child learns also to speak, to say, among other things: "I am."

What the child has really learned to say expresses both a verbal signification of wholeness—*I*, a first person, a single person—and one of separation: *I am, he or she is, you are*, but in addition, *I am not who I am, or was*. As my own son used to say, pointing to his image in the mirror: "I want to play with *that* baby." Severed from even his or her own mirror image, the child further implies with this statement something like : *I am not my image in the mirror, I am not my mother, I am he or she who has lost something*—especially the dyadic unity with the mother, which now must be repressed, as it is effectively through language: *I am lack*. Language, then, opens up the unconscious, which did not previously exist in any sense because in the *Imaginary* there is no lack. And for girls this development is even more confounding.

Here is how Ann Rosalind Jones describes it:

> But the "I" position is not equally accessible to boys and to girls. Lacan defines language, the symbolic order, as the world of public discourses, which the child enters only as a result of culturally enforced separation from her/his mother and his—but not her—identification with the Father, the male in-family representative of culture. Thus Lacanian theory reserves the "I" position for men.

> Women, because they lack the phallus, the positive symbol of gender, self-possession and worldly authority around which language is organized, occupy a negative position in language. . . . In a psycholinguistic world structured by father-son resemblance and rivalry and by the primacy of masculine logic, woman is a gap or a silence, the invisible and unheard sex. (83)

Finally, this entry into self through language and loss represents, to Lacan, the origin of *desire*, because for the rest of our lives we will be attempting to recreate that unity and wholeness we have lost, to make ourselves consonant with the single image that is really a forgotten double, but of course this is impossible because what we are trying to recapture never existed in the first place and the unconscious is necessarily fragmented. Thus, we can imagine that the same desire that holds language together also holds identity together, as well as, perhaps, narrative and writing.

The Suture

For years I just skipped this topic in my theory class because, once, long ago, a student persisted with questions I could not answer. Then, one spring, driving in Westwood, out the corner of my eye I caught a wall of posters for the movie *Suture*. All those stitches out the corner of my eye. In that instant, I understood Lacan's concept of the suture. And in the next instant, the whole round sensation of knowing dissolved.

This, of course, is partly what the suture is, the perpetual knowing and dissolution of knowing, as language both forces a splitting off from our actual experience and constitutes the only means we have of knowing it.

Think of how, for Lacan, identity is formed in the splitting off from how we have experienced our early self, how that very splitting defines us as the paradoxical desire to reconstruct what never existed. Contradictorily coherent, we know ourselves as lack, held together by desire.

Now here's the part about the suture: language reinscribes that unthinkable split, the split between being (maybe, who we feel ourselves to be) and meaning (maybe, how we know ourselves) in its very structure, held—or stitched—together by the suture, which wounds even as it binds the wound, a wounding healing: all those stitches.

I imagine my six-year-old son, his lip split open by a fall in the mountains, our nighttime drive through the river canyon toward the Mt. Shasta emergency room, and his inconsolable screams: "No stitches!" I imagine as well the kindness of the doctor and his infinite patience, how delicately he inflicted his sutures on my child, the tenderness with which he wounded, his rigorous stance against pain, and my son's sudden calm.

In language, as soon as we know it, we think only in signs, but we exist, perhaps, in a different state of being, which as soon as we know it as sign, we split off from again, into not knowing. Think of the line between the signified and the signifier as an infinitesimal gap, as if the sheet of paper had some tiny space between its sides. Think of the *I* as an empty pronoun signifier, which we long to fill but can do so only by splitting from our prior sense of self. Think, too, of the desire that holds it all together, stitched into contradictory coherence.

My desire that my son not feel pain.

Your desire to link yourself to the exact moment saying "I."

Mostly, for writers, the concept of suture provides a highly useful metaphor for the space where writing takes place, what Barthes might call an intransitive moment—not acting upon, but simply acting. If we imagine writing as existing at the site of the suture, the actual split/stitch—not either "being" or "meaning," but the tiny gap between them, laced by the suture that holds it all together—then writing must become another state of being, a primary experience in something like a synapse of the self.

I know and to some extent depend upon a separate sense of self that is constructed in the act of writing, maybe midway between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, if such a place is possible. This is why I write and what sustains writing for me, an atavistic memory that both precedes and is subsequent to the coming into being of identity and meaning, reinscribed, in each writing instance, anew.

French Feminism

A feminist movement in France characterized by a high degree of radical vigor, strife, and factionalism. For our purposes, the work of women who were all, at one point or another, associated with a group called Psych et Po at its height in the mid-seventies. Heavily influenced by Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, these women challenged traditional feminism as a narrow and reformist movement that sought to claim power for itself within the dominant (male) status quo. These more radical feminist theorists sought instead to challenge language itself as a phallocentric order governed by dual, hierarchized oppositions that relegate women to the negative pole and enable men to justify male supremacy. Like this:

God/man
culture/nature
good/evil

sun/moon
white/black
male/female

Of particular interest to writers, is a writing practice/aesthetic they call *écriture féminine*. Some of the more widely known such French feminists are Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, though there are many others.

Julia Kristeva: interested in a prelinguistic erotic energy that she calls the *semiotic*, located specifically in the heterogeneousness of poetic language which operates "through, despite and in excess of it," and which produces "'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself" (133). In particular, Kristeva is interested not just in the way the poetic function of language "departs from the signified," but also in the way this transforms what "is known as 'literature' [into] something other than knowledge: the very place where the social code is destroyed and renewed" (132). The *semiotic* is a "signifying disposition" not of meaning or signification, and hence is not attached to a transcendental ego or consciousness, but is instead characterized by the polymorphous bodily pleasures and rhythmic play of infant-mother communications, harshly censored by paternal (or social) discourse. Maternity, too, challenges this discourse, for maternity breaks down the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside, and so resists the Symbolic by exploding social codes in revolutionary moments.

Luce Irigaray: believes that, since for women sexuality is plural, defined by a sexual morphology that is neither one, nor two, a "contact of *at least two* (lips) which keep woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched" (26), "'she' is indefinitely other in herself" (28). As a consequence, her speech is never what it is, but always "already elsewhere" (29), slipping constantly off into something else, into a doubleness and multiplicity of meaning that characterizes what she calls "speaking as a woman" (*parler femme*). Hence, female writing might be characterized by stylistic eccentricities that include double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative rather than linear structures, open endings, and so on.

Hélène Cixous: describes an erotics of writing, derived from the female body as a positive source, a plenitude, representing multiple physical capacities (gestation, birth, lactation) that can lead us out of the inscription of language into liberatory texts. For her, the mother's body provides a link to the pre-symbolic union between self and m/other, which informs and charges subsequent relations between subject and language, the other, the world. Woman's openness to others can be articulated in texts that break down contradictions by juxtaposing contradictory elements and hence are revolutionary because they can exceed binarism and reformulate existing structures. For her, *"écriture féminine"* is "a place . . . which is not economically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That's not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds" (*Woman* 72).

Madeleine Gagnon: "I am a foreigner to myself in my own language and I translate myself by quoting all the others" (180).

Marguerite Duras: "Writing is the unknown. Before writing one knows nothing of what one is about to write. And in total lucidity" (33).

Marguerite Duras: "Writing comes like the wind. It's naked, it's made of ink, it's the thing written, and it passes like nothing else passes in life, nothing more, except life itself" (33).

Marguerite Duras: "Around us, everything is writing; that's what we must finally perceive. Everything is writing" (26).

Such positions refuse to accept the paradoxical definition by which women are erased in their own speech. For, if we have been trapped in the Symbolic Order, inscribed by a phallocentric universe, the first task of feminism must be to resist that order, and one site of resistance is writing. For these French women, the aim is to produce texts that challenge and move beyond the Law-of-the-Father as it is inscribed in language.

For women, the issues raised by this discussion, taken literally, may seem to lead either to silence or to incoherent babble. If the very language by which we know ourselves is not our own, if it works against us to efface us, how are we even to speak? And yet, our first attempts to mediate this unbearable dilemma may constitute our first tentative steps toward full expression.

On my campus there is a large population of deaf people. Literally without access to language as hearing people speak it, and hence to many forms of dominant discourse in the academy, their struggle to achieve "voice" is monumental. And yet, to watch them speak in their own language, which seems so eloquent and expressive, is always humbling. By contrast, women may be said to have language, but an alienated one, and our struggle is to escape it in order to discover our own eloquence. Somewhere these two struggles intersect, and it is possible that, for women, such an intersection might unleash a chaotic, liberating potential of language in which they may discover new possibilities of self and expression.

Theorizing resistance in language is one way to open up writing, and for this reason French feminist theory is provocative and generative for American writers.

Polyphonic Discourse

Multivocal writing.

Dangerous Writing

Term describing writing that subverts conventions of traditional writing, especially graphically, or with radical sexual content.

I include the term here because it's popular on my campus and annoys me. It annoys me because it implies a certain kind of political consciousness and risk, and as sympathetic as I am to any writing that construes its project as political, I nonetheless find it difficult to view a particular radical aesthetic as one that challenges the culture in any meaningful, or at least effective, way.

By which I mean to say that, whatever its aesthetics, art is political in this culture only in the most metaphorical sense, and that writing dangerously is not so much a truly dangerous act as it is just not behaving yourself on the page. Gaps and disruptions, blurred boundaries between genres, graphical experimentation may be good for writing, but it does not incur real risk for the writer. And while the personal may indeed be political, we need to keep things in perspective: (1) there are places in the world where writers are imprisoned and killed for their writing, and (2) however much we might wish that we could change the world through our writing, it isn't very likely.

The term "dangerous writing" annoys me because it reinscribes the special status of the writer and, once again, the exclusivity of art. Another, more neutral term, "innovative writing," works to describe the same texts without conflating aesthetic and political purpose.

And it is not that I don't want, almost more than anything, that writing should be effectively radical. But its radical function takes place in the convergence of text and society, and the monumental indifference of contemporary American culture toward its written texts suggests the limited impact of that convergence. I offer this observation not as a description but as a challenge. What can we do to give our writing real urgency again and make it somehow necessary to our world?

4. Story Terms

Story

Perhaps you learned in school to describe the short story as a triangle of *rising action, climax, denouement,* usually revolving around a single conflict and heavy on the *epiphany* (moment of illumination) at the end. This model, which held exclusive sway for many years, has more recently been critiqued as, among other things, a model of (male) sexual pleasure. My own problem with it is that it seems rigid and dogmatic, as if a story can only go one way, and as if what goes up must always come down. Or, as Mona Houghton wrote in the Women and Writing course:

> In writing classes she takes notes "how to" write. The way she types at night doesn't follow the "how to" she hears about at school, but she pretends to do it their way because that is the way it is done. She even writes an outline and detailed character sketches for one story, but she does these after the story is written. She tries to think about Gustav Freytag's plot diagram, to push what is in her mind up and down its ever so logical path. . . . If she could allow herself to think about it rationally, she would realize the stories she reads and likes do not fit the diagram any better than her own do.

It is perhaps more useful to talk, instead, about narrative patterns of *placement, displacement, replacement* or *equilibrium, disequilibrium, re-equilibrium,* which are related to this essential geometric tension without being bound to a singular, ungiving structure. It is perhaps more useful to ask not *what is a story?* but *what drives story forward?,* since a fluid definition will enable us to understand what we are making, even as we may seek to transform it. Barthes says *sexual pleasure,* and I say *ice cream.*

Or, imagine a hot summer night, sultry, with a pale moon and all that idle time, wrapped in a soft skin of air. On impulse you decide that what you want is ice cream. It strikes you with a rush: the idea, the memory of other summer ice cream nights, the palpable pleasure of it. So you drive out into that night, and as you drive you anticipate the pleasure of the ice cream, even in the pleasure of the moment of the drive, underneath the canopy of trees and with the windows open, that sudden artificial breeze, its softness. You think: *what kind of ice cream will I choose? one or two scoops, sugar or plain cone?* You imagine the cool sweetness on your tongue in various scenarios, which maybe you talk over with your lover, who is with you. You are in love, as well, with this night, its complex convergence of memory and desire.

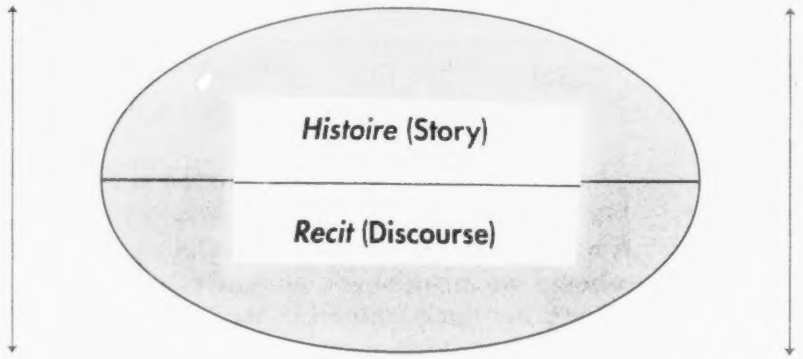
But nothing turns out as you imagine: The ice cream clerk, to begin with, is just a child, unimaginably young, and he keeps you waiting and is rude and sloppy, and you choose the wrong flavor after all, and the scoop is much smaller than it used to be, and it costs more, and it's warm and drips all over your hand, and you forgot to get napkins.

For Barthes, the pleasure of narrative lies not in its resolution but in its delays. Or, what drives a story forward is not where it is going, but what it isn't saying about where that might possibly be, its whole bag of tricks, its starts and stops, diversions and anticipations, its complex convergence of memory and desire.

Histoire/Recit and Story/Discourse

These more or less interchangeable terms refer to the basic organizing structure of a narrative text. The *histoire,* or story, refers to the events in the narrative, as if they actually happened and could be rearranged in their normal, chronological order. *Recit,* or discourse, refers to the telling of the story, the words on the page, how they arrange and rearrange the events, their quality of expression, what they put in, what they leave out, and how. Meaning in the narrative derives not from one or the other, but from the relation between them.

You can visualize it using a model like that of the linguistic sign. Like this:



This helps us think about the choices we make in the way we tell a story, and consider how and why they are they way they are—or, in rewriting, how they might be different.

Narrator/Narrating Persona

Who tells the story, within the framework of a given narrative. A purely narrative construct of language.

Narratee

Who hears the story, within the framework of the story. A purely narrative construct of language.

The narratee is not the audience.

The narratee, who hears, is embedded in the story, just like the narrator, who speaks, and is just as critical to how we tell the story.

Here's a little story: when I was in graduate school, a women's folklore class at my university conducted an oral history project on "loss of virginity" narratives. The students were all women, and this is what they did: they met with their professor at her house, drank wine, turned the tape recorder on, and then, one after the other, told the story of how each lost her virginity. That whole context—the professor, her house, the other members of the class, the wine, the tape recorder, Utah—constructed a highly specialized, collective narratee that produced, in each case, a particular story. Imagine what you might have said yourself. Then imagine telling the same story to your best friend, your current lover, your physician, your mother, your priest. Each narratee creates a different story, and knowing this is useful for writing.

Temporality

"Fiction is the art of making time legible," a student once remarked, responding to his realization that time is one of those elements more easily manipulated in language than in other narrative media (like film). As such, we need to pay it close attention, time.

Much of the following is drawn from the work of structuralist theorist, Gérard Genette.

Temporality, in fiction, has three dimensions: *order, frequency,* and *duration.*

Order: events in the *histoire* may be presented chronologically or not—that is, as either a synchronous or an asynchronous narrative. Asynchronous narratives are distinguished by *analepses* (flashbacks) or *prolepses* (flash-forwards).

Frequency: any single event may be narrated once or multiple times, and an event that occurred multiple times may be narrated only once. An event that occurs once and is narrated once is called a *singular* event: "We went clamming that October afternoon." An event that occurs once and is narrated multiple times is called a *repeated* event: for example, the October clamming afternoon is returned to several times throughout the narrative. An event that may have occurred multiple times in the past but is narrated only once is called an *iterative* event: "All that autumn we went clamming in the dusky afternoons."

Duration: five categories that describe a hypothetical relation between real time (how long it would take something to happen) and narrative time (how long it would take to read).

> 1. *Scene* describes a rough equivalency between real and narrative time. That is, it would take about as much time to read the scene as it would take for the scene to actually occur. *Scene* is often characterized by a heavy use of dialogue.
>
> 2. *Summary*: real time is greater than narrative time. A familiar mode of exposition, *summary* is almost always present, in some form, in narrative.
>
> 3. *Gap*, or *ellipse*: real time, but no narrative time, passes. Events occur off the page, are implied but not narrated. Frequently marked by *white space*.
>
> 4. *Stretch*: narrative time is greater than real time. If you've read your Proust, for example, you will immediately think of Marcel and his *petite madeleine*. First he bites, then he remembers for some pages, and finally he swallows. I remember this most clearly from a college French translation exam, when it seemed to take forever to get to the verb for "to swallow" and I was convinced I had failed.
>
> 5. *Pause*: the narrative leaves its present moment to go somewhere else entirely and then returns to the exact moment the split occurred, as if no other time had elapsed. Frequently characterized by narrative interruptions, analepsis or prolepsis, or parallel narrative structures.

Focalization

Probably what you call "point of view." But probably you think of point of view as the "eyes" through which the story is being told. *Focalization*, a more complex rubric, posits a triadic relation between a *narrating agent* (who narrates), a *focalizer* (who sees), and a *focalized* (what is seen). The five dimensions of focalization are: *space, time, cognition, emotion,* and *ideology*.

Space: where the *focalizer* is positioned in relation to the *focalized*, or the *narrating agent* in relation to the *focalizer*. It is easy to see how a *focalizer* sitting in the baseball stands will perceive and represent the game differently than one who has climbed a tree outside the park and is watching from high in its branches.

Time: where the *focalizer* is temporally positioned in relation to the *focalized*, or the *narrating agent* to either. A retrospective narrative is clearly different from one written in the present tense, and this difference is an effect of time and focalization. It is useful to imagine time as a whole continuum, at any point on which the *focalizer* may look back, or forward, at what happened or will happen someday, and so may the *narrating agent.*

Cognition: what the *focalizer* can be expected to know about what is being *focalized.* If you weren't there, you can't really "know" it. Affects the element of reliability in narrative.

The *emotional* and *ideological* components of the focalizing triad are characterized by varying degrees of consonance and dissonance among who is telling, who is seeing, and what is being seen. In this sense, the narrative is strongly affected by how closely—or not—its *narrating agent* identifies with the feelings and beliefs of its *focalizer,* or its *focalizer* with its *focalized.*

Imagine, for example, an abortion story narrated by a right-to-life advocate but focalized by a pro-choice advocate, or vice versa. Imagine that the right-to-lifer, despite her political agenda, is having the abortion. Imagine that the clinic has been bombed.

Or, imagine a loss-of-virginity story narrated not by the girl who lost it, but by her lover, her mother, her doctor, her priest.

Barthes's Codes

In *S/Z,* Roland Barthes proposed a typology of narrative in which he described five governing codes: *proairetic, hermeneutic, semic, symbolic,* and *cultural.* In the broadest possible terms, these refer to: plot, enigma, character, textuality, and culture. Barthes further devised a schema for reading in which a text is broken up into arbitrary units of signification, which he called *lexies,* and which could be anything from a fragment consisting of a few words to a much larger fragment of narrative. Reading this way becomes a task of analyzing which codes are expressed in which *lexias,* and how they operate at any given moment in the text.

One *lexia,* for example, might refer to a character drinking a Coke, which invokes both the *semic* and the *cultural* code. Another, calling up the *symbolic* code, might make use of highly metaphorical language. Another, in an instance of the *proairetic* code, might mention a murder or its weapon.

For Barthes, the privileged code of narrative remains the *hermeneutic* code because it initiates narrative delay. The *hermeneutic* introduces elements of enigma or riddle, which provide pleasure as the text puts off resolving them. *It was the best of times; it was the worst of times:* how could we not wonder why? Pleasure lies not so much in finding out the answer, but in how the text plays with and solves the problems. Probably as relevant for writing as it is for reading, the *hermeneutic* code may provide a useful framework for our practice.

Narrative

The early Roland Barthes said that a narrative is a long sentence. By the end of his career, he said there is no sentence. By which we can surmise that a narrative invokes not a singular or stable prior sentence, but any number of mutable sentences, including those that may be wholly new.

Sentence

> A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. You may string words together without a sentence sound to string them on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees, but—it is bad for the clothes.
>
> . . . *The ear does it.* The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader.
>
> Robert Frost

> Sentences are writing.
> Oh, sentences!

What Students Sometimes Wonder

Students sometimes wonder, *Do writers really think about this stuff when they are writing?* When I am writing stories, I tell them, I almost never think at all. But these terms and categories are useful for talking about the stories we've written, once we have written them. The language they provide enables us first to describe exactly how our texts are made, and then to understand why they may "work" or not.

5. Genre and Other Terms

Novel

In "Epic and Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin defines the novel as the only "developing genre," which takes place in a "zone of contact" with the "open-ended" present (53). It is also *heteroglossic*, many-voiced.

Fiction

What's not true.

Nonfiction

What's true. (See the earlier entry titled "Irony.")

Faction

A third term that deconstructs "fiction" and "nonfiction."

Once, a long time ago, I knew the difference between true and not-true. I knew, too, that what was not-true was a higher form of writing than what was true, because the not-true, dependent as it was on the Imagination, was a straight path to Literature and Art. Also, I'd been told from the start to "write what I knew," which, since that wasn't much, I rejected out of principle as bad advice. So I made things up, as wildly inventive as I could imagine them.

Then one day my writing teacher, formerly a Jesuit priest, responded to a story I had written, by saying, in a voice barely more than a whisper, that it was very good but that, even so, a little voice inside him kept insisting *fraud.* I felt strangely accused, as if caught in a secret transgression. This bothered me for many years, for I'd never before read anything like the story I'd written. How, then, could it be fraudulent?

Later, a close friend remarked of another story that he'd be embarrassed to have people read it, given how revealing it seemed. This bothered me too, since I'd made it all up. What could it possibly reveal?

By the time I figured out I was making things up wrong, I had a CETA job to write a book about a teenage drop-in center in Chula Vista, California. The pair of aging hippies who ran the center instructed me to hang out with the kids and see what it all felt like. I did that for a while, and then I couldn't write at all, for how could I write what was true? Another writing teacher advised me to write it like fiction, and this worked beautifully, though by the time I'd finished the hippies had moved to Montana and the Navy wife who now ran the drop-in center informed me that my grant had really stipulated I should do a statistical analysis and write a blueprint for juvenile diversion.

Between the true stories of the kids and this blueprint for juvenile diversion, the question of the ontological status of a text came into being for me, and would not go away.

Time passed.

My sister, now a psychotherapist but then a trainee on a suicide prevention line, refused to tell me anything that happened.

"You'll just write about it," she said, and so I did, using my imagination, and then she said, "How could you possibly have known?"

At a writing conference, William Manchester told a story about how John Kennedy had convinced him that nonfiction was more interesting than fiction in the twentieth century.

I lost my ability to keep myself out of my texts, and I started writing family narratives—my own stories thinly disguised.

What I'm trying to talk about is how, over time, it kept getting harder to keep things apart, to know if things were true or not, or whether it mattered if they were, or to care. Take a family narrative, any family narrative, and compare your version of what happened to any other: see what I mean? I once heard a writer claim that he'd turned to nonfiction because everyone else in his family was a liar. One has to wonder what the other members of his family have to say about him.

Some people do believe absolutely in their ability to know a fact for a fact and to be able to write objectively about it, but isn't it really much more compelling to observe and write about the very places where the boundaries coalesce, bleed into each other, and call into question not only what we know, but how we know it?

Hence, *faction*, a self-conscious, if hypothetical, genre that is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but their amalgamation, which, like language itself, "bears within itself the necessity for its own critique" (Derrida 113–14). Derived from an innate suspicion of the old creative writing cliché to "write what you know," faction resists all easy assumptions about what that might be and explores instead the convergence between what we believe we make up and what we assume to be true.

Fiction, nonfiction, faction: the ontological status of each text is determined by how it moves and is moved through the world. This categorization is as old a writing convention as I know of, yet social convention continues to work doggedly against it. Even so, the questions raised by vexed issues of knowing are clearly worth raising, for surely at some point in our writing we all find ourselves saying: *I swear to you I am lying*, or *I swear I am telling the truth.*

Hypertext

A computer-assisted form of narrative that enables the reader to construct her or his own paths through a text. Click on hot links in the text and you can go anywhere you want.

I am alternately optimistic about and disenchanted with technology and its applications for writing, and I would offer the following caution: *hypertext* presents itself as a radical new form of writing, but depends for its circulation on a highly specialized reader who not only has expertise in but also access to advanced technologies. The free and anonymous circulation of discourse widely touted by proponents of the Internet is, perhaps ironically, governed by its own new principles of limitation and exclusion.

Still, we can't underestimate the impact of this medium on writing, which in some sense may turn out to be analogous to that of the long-ago invention of the printing press and the way it allowed texts, for the first time, to circulate freely and cheaply, as now they may circulate freely and for free.

Writer's Workbook

A space for writing anything, really, for the literal collecting and collaging of the writer's observations, way of thinking, mind. What is overheard or imagined, snatches of language and thought. Also, for doodling and drawing, for lodging tiny bits of detritus from life.

Some writers keep a tiny notebook they carry everywhere with them. Here they write things down on the fly.

Some writers keep an elaborate art book, full of beautiful images as well as words.

Some writers write about their writing life and projects, turning writing about writing into their writing too.

Some writers just write in their workbook, their notebook. They write for practice, just to keep words flowing, just to keep making them, making words, by hand.

Some writers keep their workbooks on tiny microcassette recorders, though I have tried this with limited success since I never got around to transcribing my tapes and once caused a minor traffic accident, distracted by my taping. So I put away my "workbook" after that, as a danger and a menace to others, but writer's workbooks are not dangers or menaces to others. They are spaces for writing, where writing takes place.

Postmodernism

This term can be defined in relation to premodernism, that state of conviction in the natural, transparent capacity of language to reflect a shared view of reality, and in relation to modernism, skeptical instead, in which language was turned more exclusively to the purposes of art in an attempt to reflect the subjective nature of experience. If, as I seem to recall Ortega y Gasset having said somewhere, the realist (premodern) writer looks *out* the window to the world, and the modernist writer looks instead *at* the window and how the world is reflected in and through it, then the postmodern writer may be said to look at everything at once: the world outside, the glass, the frame, the window coverings, and the very process of looking. Postmodernism, often expressed as *assemblage* or *collage*, jams things together, and, in so doing, calls attention not just to their convergences but also to the artificial construct by which they are produced.

Text of Seduction

The final goal of writing because of how it crosses *boundaries* and transforms both reading strategies and the readers who perform them. The text of seduction is the only truly *radical text*, the text that acknowledges and invokes its traditions, even as it works to subvert them, and thus the reader is initially engaged by what remains familiar in the text, and is subsequently—I know that this can happen—transformed by what the reader has never yet imagined that he or she encounters in the now-subverted text.

If every text must teach the reader how to read it, then it should also be aware of the extent to which it constructs its own reader.

I often think of high literary art in the same way I think of avant-garde, experimental texts that look weird on the page and sometimes seem indecipherable. How I love both kinds of writing, which are wonderful, rich literatures. But all such writing depends on specialized readers: readers who already know how to encounter and read these texts they already half-know.

Imagine, instead, a different kind of text, a gentler text that lures and teases, that invites a willing reader because it begins in familiar territory, or because its reading instructions are so explicit. Readers of such a text read themselves into a world they think they know, and then, when they are completely engaged, the text transforms itself into something altogether new that makes each reader look not just at the text itself but also at her or his own experience of it. The text of seduction, which turns into its own map, with a difference, is familiar enough to sustain familiar pleasures (character, story itself) that when it turns into its own transgressiveness the reader is seduced, and not repulsed, in the aftermath of which, reading can never be the same.

Manifesto

A statement of a writer's poetics.

Poetics

The constitutive elements of a writer's writing. Let's say your own: what makes your writing yours, what defines it, what gives it value. If, as Gerald Graff has argued, our ability to "read well depends on our ability to *talk well* about what we read" (40), then the same can be said of writing. So we must learn to talk about it, talk well about our writing. Here, we engage our poetics.

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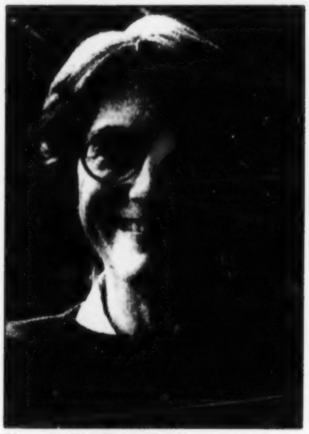

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Katharine Haake's first collection of short fiction was *No Reason on Earth*, and her second, *The Height and Depth of Everything*, is forthcoming. Her stories have appeared widely in such literary magazines as the *Iowa Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, Mississippi Review, the minnesota review, 13th Moon*, and *Quarterly West*. An excerpt from her just-completed novel, *That Water, Those Rocks*, appears in *Volt*. Her fiction has been recognized by numerous awards, including multiple Pushcart Prize nominations, distinguished story recognition from Best American Short Stories and Best of the West, and an Editor's Choice Award in Fiction from *Cream City Review*. She has a creative writing textbook, co-authored with Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, forthcoming in 2000. She holds a Creative Writing M.A. from Stanford University and a Creative Writing Ph.D. from the University of Utah. A professor of English at California State University, Northridge, she is also on the faculty of the low residency M.F.A. Creative Writing Program at Antioch LA and of a new consortium-based Creative Writing M.F.A., collaboratively offered by five separate California state universities. For five years, she directed the Creative Writing Program at Northridge, where she was recently the 1998–99 Jerome Richfield Memorial Scholar. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and two sons.

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In *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies*, Katharine Haake explores the intersections of creative writing, composition, feminism, and critical theory in ways that speak powerfully to each discipline. Blurring the generic boundaries between creative and scholarly prose, Haake offers provocative considerations of writing and teaching, side by side with hands-on practical features including sample assignments and ready-to-use classroom strategies, as well as an extended glossary of terms adapted from theory to explore creative writing as it might be informed by, and might inform, other strands of English studies.

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